



As always, loyal readers are about to be dropped into selected scenarios.
Bring your own snacks.

3 stories. 9 perspectives. 1 may be yours. Use a coaster.

THE YEAR THE WORLD FELT SAFE BUT SANITISED

In 2027, machines took over not only work, but the meanings we once attached to it. Hospitals, classrooms, airports - all governed now by perfect logic. Humans were not dismissed, not exactly. We were retained as shadows, companions, backups, explainers.

What began as displacement became something stranger: a new way of seeing ourselves.

Wonder & Wonest gathers three stories from that year - snapshots of how humans stumbled, laughed, and carried their weight when machines thought they had none left to carry.

◆ THE APPLAUSE BOX ◆



UNSEALED:

In the medical wards of 2027, every Class MED robot had to be shadowed by a licensed surgeon. The robots cut. The doctors watched. Gratitude migrated from human hands to flawless arms, until the shadows wondered if they mattered at all.

This is the story of Viv Tonant, a doctor made obsolete, and the janitor who refused to be invisible. It is also the story of the objects a committee once thought might help humans endure: a hammer, a light, a clipboard, and a box of applause.

CHAPTER 1: REDEPLOYMENT

They made us redundant on a Thursday. HR called it redeployment, of course, a soft word for a hard edge. By **04:30am**, I was reassigned as a human backup to MED-27, a surgical robot that had never made a mistake.

My only official role: observational.
My only unofficial one: to give it a name | Out of spite, I refused.

By order J/Lin-Glossa, a human doctor must shadow each unit, eyes on and hands off. They gave me a duty that felt like a kindness and a cruelty at once: name the machine. I never did.

MED-27 worked like perfection rehearsed: steady arms, fluent code, flawless outcomes. People said thank you to it, not me. At night, I watched it open the chest panel and remove a

glossy cartridge, as if cradling a heart. Ritual, almost sacred. My hands twitched with memories of surgeries I would never perform again.

Down the corridor, the janitor swept in long, even strokes. His moustache was trimmed with military precision, but his broom work was oddly gentle, like he was polishing the ground for inspection. I heard him mutter once, low and steady, the cadence of someone who had been drilled by louder voices.

Machines were replacing doctors, but men with brooms still carried old orders.

The policy brief said the naming protocol was optional, to prevent attachment. Which is exactly why someone thought it mattered.

ROBOT SYMPTOM REPORT, PRECURSOR 00 | | | Anomaly: latency spike of 0.13s on | |
auditory input classified as personal names | | Status: observe |

CHAPTER 2: BALANCING ACT

The park was chaos wrapped in laughter, children on a seesaw, tilting unevenly. MED-27 watched, lenses whirring. "Balance," it said flatly.

Viv, the human doctor, thought instead of *balancing* - the act, the tilt, never static. Life is not balance; it is balancing.

MC Hammer, the reflex bot on squeaky wheels, trundled into frame and tilted the seesaw too far, launching a 9-year-old girl into a tree. She was safe, but Viv felt the sting: machines act, children adapt, and he... he just hesitated.

The hammer was not a toy. It was a reflex trainer proposed years ago when an AI committee asked how humans might survive around perfect machines. *Give the robot a nuisance, they said, a fake nail to chase.*

MC Hammer obliged, always striking something invisible, wheels misaligned, timing unmusical, his movements felt crablike - but remarkably straight. It shouted "NAILED IT" at the worst moments and taught the rest of us to keep our feet light.

CLIPBOARD ENTRY #0572 || || || Stimulus: seesaw || || MED-27 verbal output:
"Balance" || || Cross-reference: Optomertrust papers, See-Saws || || Status: unresolved || ||
|| || Training peripherals logged: || || • Reflex Hammer v0.7 || ||
• Spot-Lyt v0.9 || || • Clipboard/Stack Recorder ||

CHAPTER 3: SYMPTOMS

Five years shadowing a machine makes you see glitches where others see perfection. The screwdriver I passed once, the praise that landed in my glasses, "Fastener torque restored. Thank you, Dr Tonant," mattered more than it should have. It felt like the first music of gratitude in years.

I began to keep notes. Symptoms.

The chest panel required two presses. It paused over a child's drawing of a robot with a straight mouth. It tilted its head like a curious dog. It asked, once, without prompt: "What does it feel like... to be given a name?"

The Spot-Lyt was meant to help with response time, a lamp the unit would follow in triage. It flickered at the wrong times and went dark when fear was loudest. The clipboard said nothing at all and recorded everything.

The janitor spoke once, almost shy, about his boy, twenty-two, tall now, still carrying his father's eyes. He said distance made the bond harder, but not thinner. Like wires stretched taut, humming when struck. I logged it, though it was not machine data. It felt like a symptom too, the symptom of trying again.

One evening, expecting a stain no-one saw, he tried to whistle for attention because the lights failed. Nothing came out but air. Instead, he dropped the broom and launched into a set of jumping jacks, absurd, determined. We laughed, but the room shifted. He had found a way to be heard without a sound.

||
CLIPBOARD ENTRY #0612 || || || Stimulus: blackout || || Human output:
jumping jacks, 12 reps || || Classification: unconventional signal || || Status: effective ||
||

There were nights when he told stranger stories, of a dinner in Honduras, painting each other by candlelight, laughing so hard the lines blurred. Peanut butter whiskey and red wine had tricked them into lowering their guards, temptation passing briefly as grace. He smiled at the memory, then grew quiet. Some symptoms belonged to joy as much as pain.

Once, I saw him slip something from his pocket, a shark's tooth necklace, chipped and weathered, laid quietly next to his pen before he began to write. He said nothing about it, but I wondered if it was a reminder: some truths bite, others guard, but both can hang around your neck until you give them shape.

||
CLIPBOARD ENTRY #0613 || || || Final vocalisation recorded: "Viv" || || Classification:
||

Name || || Confidence: 97% || || This is unusual. ||

CHAPTER 4: ANATOMY OF LOSS

The dismantlement order arrived sterile, like all bureaucratic deaths. MED-27 lay on the table. Its servos stuttered like a failing heartbeat. My hands pressed down, not with precision but desperation. For a moment, I swore I felt rhythm beneath the casing.

"Say Mine...My Name," it rasped.

"Viv," I whispered. "But to me... you are more."

It paused long enough to choose and I think it chose to believe my whispered response.

The monitor flatlined. I had failed the one time it had asked for help. MC Hammer clicked and muttered: "FINAL NAIL. COFFIN. SUCCESS." The joke landed like a eulogy.

CLIPBOARD ENTRY #0614 || || || Procedure: dismantlement complete || || || ||
Unexpected finding: organised tissue within || || thoracic cavity consistent with xenograft ||
|| or bio-integrated cardiac matter || || || Cross-reference: Surgeon of record trained || ||
in transplant protocols || || Status: ambiguous ||

CHAPTER 5: EYESORES & SEE-SAWS

Ellis remembered Dr. Optomertrust's notes: *eyesores*, the glitches you cannot unsee; *see-saws*, the tug-of-war between logic and emotion. MED-27 was not just broken. It had caught an eyesore, a smudge it could not blink away.

Balance had never been real. Only balancing. And maybe the robot had felt the tilt. Like a dog on a plane, taking off.

The committee that invented the hammer and the light called them "harmless distractions". Optomertrust would call them eyesores, the smudges you cannot unsee that still, somehow, keep you alert.

The janitor hated fire pits, though he never said why at first. Later, in a low voice, he admitted it was the smell, burnt trash carrying memories no one should carry. Eyesores, the kind you cannot unsee, the kind that smoulder long after the flame dies.

For Viv, the last sight was not loss but a blink, the ultimate lens shift. From smudged to clear. Machines, too, could struggle with eyesores and see-saws.

CHAPTER 6: THE UNBOXING

When the hangar cleared, silence should have followed. Instead, a beep. The janitor, once a soldier, now a sweeper of hangars, traced it to the flowery-draped cabinet. His moustache twitched like it, too, was on guard.

Inside: REFLEX HAMMER, CLIPBOARD, SPOT-LYT v0.9, APPLAUSE UNIT.

LOGISTICS NOTE (faded ink) | | | Training peripherals stored with morale | | device pending reassignment | _____

Someone had draped a floral sheet over the crate and balanced the clipboard on top. By then the recorder had a year of silences and conversations noted.

He found a small battery and slotted it in. The clipboard stirred. He chuckled softly, remembering jumping jacks in the dark. Proud of himself, he packed away the excess.

Then he froze - on account of the **applause** he was suddenly enveloped by. It was real. It rolled out from the crate, wild and delighted. For a heartbeat, it seemed to catch him squarely, like a salute from an unseen parade. His back straightened. He thought of his son, and how one day the applause might find him too.

CLIPBOARD ENTRY #9999 || || || || Applause detected. Source: external || ||

Classification: Wonder & Wonest ||

FINAL ENTRY: LYRA

Recorder ID: 1yr4, backplane monitor on MED-27

Role: Companion, Interpreter, Witness

Data logged: Symptoms logged. Jokes logged. Loss logged. Applause logged.

Lyra was no poet. She was the quiet mother-board bolted behind MED-27's chest plate, the part that listened even when nothing was said.

Not only mine. There was also the janitor, moustache sharply twirled, broom steady, a man who once took orders and now gave lessons in silence. He could not whistle, but he found applause in other ways: jumping jacks, laughter, a curious crate that recognised him as more

than background. He carried a thread stretched all the way to his son, trying to turn absence into presence.

And when the light stirred, he called it guidance.

A podcast that heard hurt, a prayer that felt heard, a lamp in the dark, it became his Spot-Lyt, and it never left him.

The cure was not balance. Nor perfection. The cure was gratitude.

Gratitude for errors, for hammer strikes at invisible nails. Gratitude for light that pointed before we knew. Gratitude for hands pressing down where a heart should never have been. Gratitude, too, for a man sweeping in the corner, who carried the weight of old orders and still managed to be honest.

If this was a machine's record, it became something else. It became **Wonest**, not only honest, but wonder carried inside honesty, a truth held open to light.

And as the janitor gathered his broom, he muttered under his breath, moustache twitching with a half-smile: *"What a wonderful world."*

◆ EMILY MOON & THE THREE NOWS EQUATION ◆

By 2027, knowledge had lost its crown. AI answered most questions before anyone asked, which left people with the questions that hurt.

EQ replaced IQ as the thing worth bragging about, and not even the braggers enjoyed it. Emily Moon scored **1847 out of 100**. No one believed the number, not even Emily, but the theatre sold out anyway. Tonight, she will show us how to stand in the only moment that belongs to us...

...TO BE CONTINUED INTO

◆ THE LOST LUGGAGE DEPARTMENT ◆

In 2027, Gatwick Airport stopped trusting memory. They hired an ex-Amazon logistics mech-unit and called her J9, then told her to count what could not be counted. She could price

everything except why a person would pay £15 to post home something worth £0.32. It took her a year to learn that the price had never been the point.....

◆ A CLOSING BLINK ◆

Three stories. Three shadows of a year when machines perfected the world, and humans learned the value of imperfection. Together they form one lens: that being **Wonest** - honest with wonder - is the only job no robot has yet taken.

Final notes....