

Robotics

by BJ Hollars

I made this robot. Everyone was making them. Mine was a vacuum cleaner with a rubber jack-o-lantern mask taped to the handle. His name was Z-Bot2131F, but I just called him Brady, after my dead brother. Brady, my brother, had come out cold, and then we buried him in Lindenwood Cemetery, and then, directly following, we cried. Just a few weeks later, we started going to church more often. And then, I taped the mask to the handle.

Everyone in the neighborhood thought Brady was the greatest, and sometimes I'd wheel him around the sidewalks and kids like Joseph Annis and Ryan Curl would come trickling from their houses to ask questions about how he worked and how I'd built him.

"Does he understand English?" Ryan asked, and I said, "Oh yeah, and a little Spanish too."

"Well what does he do?" asked Joseph, and I said, "Two things. Watch."

I wheeled my robot inside Joseph's house, and I plugged him into the wall. Then, I pretended to check invisible dials and cranks. I made some beeping sounds with my mouth and acted nervous, like he might blow up or something if he wasn't properly handled. "Get back!" I cried, and I stood back myself for suspense.

Joseph's cat—a tabby named Mushu—began brushing up against the side of my robot, and that's when I plugged Brady into the wall and pressed down hard on the switch. Brady burst to life, and a light flashed somewhere on the front panel, and Mushu took off up the stairs, hissing. I grinned, guided Brady along the floor some, and we all listened to the chortle and cough of that robot hard at work. That jack-o-lantern mask was always loose. It fell off sometimes when the tape got warm or damp or collected too many animal hairs. After a few minutes of my demonstration, I killed the switch, and I ran my hand over the top of the handle.

"Yup. So far I've trained it to do two things," I reviewed. "He scares cats and he vacuums carpets." Neither of them thought this

was very impressive, so I told them that he could scare some dogs too, small ones. They shrugged and began talking about basketball.

“Well how about this,” I tried, waving my arms to get their attention. “I’ll let you guys spend the night and we’ll order pizzas, and I’ll help you build robots like mine.” This, they agreed, sounded pretty good, and I said great, then it was settled, and I dragged Brady home to prepare for the sleepover.

When I stepped inside the house, Mom rose from the table, shouting, asking where had I been, and what was I thinking, and how dare I vanish without telling her!

“Mom,” I said. “Who vanished? We just went for a walk.”

“And it didn’t cross your mind to inform me?” I shook my head no. It hadn’t. I slapped the top of the vacuum like maybe it could be his fault instead. She rubbed her temples and closed her eyes and said, “Come on Dylan, you have to try harder for me now, okay?” I said okay. “Because the last thing I need is for you to disappear like that.” I nodded. She opened her eyes and winced at the lights. “Maybe you and Z-Bot should go to your room for awhile and think about things.” I said fine, we would, that it sounded like a good idea to me.

“But you have to order pizza,” I called before closing the door. “Cuz Ryan and Joe are spending the night tonight.” Mom laughed and said no they weren’t, not in this house. When I asked why not, she slipped the workout tape into the mouth of the VCR and spread her mat on the floor.

“It’s a school night, remember?”

I groaned, but I didn’t get angry.

We could blame Mom for many things, but we couldn’t blame her for Thursday.

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Snug between sheets, Brady and I slept together, alongside a few stuffed animals—tigers and bears and a dolphin. The vacuum was cold, but I buried it in plush and couldn’t feel a thing.

Some nights, when I couldn't sleep, I made up dreams. I pretended to sleep and then I pretended to wake, and then I pretended to see that vacuum come alive. Sometimes Brady's human voice would come from the inside of the vacuum bag. It would say things like, "Help! It's me! It's your baby brother! I've been right here all along!" Sometimes, there wouldn't be any sounds at all, just a punching from the inside, a tiny fist jabbing for the zipper. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, but I must have mentioned it to Mom; that Brady, the baby, had been waking me up at night. Startled, she asked, "Waking you up how?"

"I don't know. Scratching from the inside of the vacuum bag and stuff." Mom grabbed my hand and took me to tell my father. I told him the same thing.

"You're crazy," he said to Mom, then glanced at me. "And you too. You're crazy for making her crazy." I returned to my room while they continued talking.

"Can't we all just move on?" he called a few minutes later, but I had just plugged Brady in, so I could hardly hear a thing.

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One night, Ryan Curl came over and he worked on building a robot from a skateboard and a broken telephone. Meanwhile, I made a few modifications to Brady. For instance, I slipped one of baby Brady's miniature shirts around the vacuum handle and straightened it to match with the mask. And I unknotted the cord too, and polished the wheels with a wet rag.

Ryan's robot was pretty bad, and when I stared at the wires laid flat on the skateboard deck, he said, "It may not look like much, but it can think like a human."

"Think like a human how?" I scoffed.

"Watch," he said, and he tapped a few numbers on the remainder of the phone base and then shoved the skateboard across my living room with his foot.

"I programmed him to do that," he said. I rolled my eyes and told

him mine could think like a human too, and then I plugged him in and listened to him whir.

Mom walked into the room to tell us to knock it off, but then she glimpsed baby Brady's shirt on robot Brady's body, and she didn't yell one bit. She wore sweatpants because she was always wearing sweatpants then.

"Dylan," she asked, "how could you?"

"But...Brady said to," I lied, "in a dream." Mom started crying, and she slammed the vacuum to the floor. She tripped over Ryan's robot and scattered the pieces everywhere. Ryan watched, and when Mom left, I leaned over to him. "See?" I whispered. "My robot can even make people cry. Can yours?"

He typed in a few numbers on the phone base to try it out. Then he typed a few more numbers. But the whole time, while he typed and failed, typed and failed again, I just crossed my arms and grinned. I crossed my arms, I hummed, and I grinned. Then, I plugged Brady back in, stirring him awake.

