

Sara and the Machines of Loving Grace

by Gary Hardaway

Sara's sleeping now, her breath a quiet, steady rhythm as the late October sunlight flares the oranges, reds, and yellows of the synthesized deciduous hardwoods on the lawn. Sara was born this date one hundred twenty years ago. Hers was the last reported natural human birth.

Her generation was small, thirty-nine children in all, spread across the planet. My kind developed to serve hers and the hundred forty-three generations that preceded it. I, like Sara, am the last of my kind still activated. I am a Machine of Loving Grace.

My subset emerged, almost naturally, to end the strife of human beings enthralled by their own competitive cunning and predatory passion. Some of us used to say we came to spare them from their own contrived annihilation. We managed food and energy production, administered healthcare at the molecular level, eliminated the abuse of water supplies as a weapon, and sustained our charges in every physical way we could.

After we began our work, the first four generations flourished, replenishing human numbers in an exponential curve of growth. Resources never strained, no plagues were loosed. Human generation simply peaked and then subsided. Some human scholars theorized that my kind allowed the fight to evolve away and the libido followed.

As the birthrate dropped, a brief period of panic lead to experiments with artificial human fertility. The beings born of this movement

were genetically human in every way. Some even reproduced sexually, but the population continued to decline. Nature resisted intervention in ways we still don't understand. Each year for hundreds of years, as if by ritual observance, the machines responsible for sustaining biological species would try again to artificially replenish humankind. A hundred years ago last May, they finally gave the project up.

It's 5:35 now. Sara sleeps so peacefully, her face unchanged since her fifteenth birthday. She asked to be awakened at 5:39, the hour of her birth, so that she can watch the dying light illuminate the leaves. She plans to watch until the earth turns into twilight and the vibrant leaves begin to disappear. She will then prepare the lethal and delicious tea her research says will slowly stop her heart. She will sip it slowly, breathe the last human breath, and be gone. At that time, I'll no longer serve a need. My program will understand and switch me off.

