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Latest Model

By Terry R. McConnell

Morton Paley’s partner Mona saw him off to work a bit late, with a lingering kiss and a frisky pinch on his backside. The kiss was completely normal and expected, the pinch, less so. It made him wonder what she had in mind for that evening. “Hopefully not that S&M bit again,” he thought, his cheeks reddening. The last time this had happened, she had met him at the door dressed as a nun, shifting a leather belt menacingly from one hand to the other.

“Look at your hair, naughty boy,” she said. “Did you even try to comb it?”

Her aggressive phrasing only confirmed his suspicions about her plans for the evening, and he thought it best to back away from her for some distance before turning to walk to work.

To us, Morton and Mona would seem an odd couple indeed. Morton, middle aged, middle management, and increasingly middle-heavy, was the very image of the geeky corporate cog. Mona, with her contoured athletic legs, perky uplifted breasts, and tight little bottom, would not have been out of place in a centerfold. Advances in robotics had made it possible for Morton to own the perfect sexual partner, selected from a vast array of models, who would pander to all his fantasies. The only thing that might have raised eyebrows in Morton’s case was his choice of the Mona model, an edgy unit that, according to rumor, had some interesting bugs in its operating system.

At the office, Morton first looked in at the mailroom to check for any new dongles. Morton’s employers, who were leery of hackers, insisted that all enterprise communication take place off the network. Thus, employees commonly exchanged data, memos, and other business-related items via small solid-state memory devices placed in each other’s boxes.

Morton’s box was empty, prompting a transitory surge of optimism about his workload for the day, but then he remembered his late start. Burton, who shared his cubicle, was always on time, and had probably picked up both of their dongles. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Wendy Borg stooping to check her box down the row. Wendy was very tall, and the placement of her box on the bottom row seemed cruel.

“Hey, WB, don’t throw out your back down there.”

The voice belonged to Jennifer Wolde, and Morton felt his face growing red for the second time that morning. Jennifer, or JW as everybody called her, was everything Morton was not: born into the best of families, educated at the best of schools, and fabulously good looking, so much so that she could have been mistaken for somebody’s robotic partner. Having already climbed very high in the corporation, she was supposedly next in line for a prestigious promotion. None of this explains Morton’s visceral reaction to her presence in the room, or the way his natural awkwardness always compounded itself around her. The fact was, he was blindly, completely, and hopelessly in love with her.

“Don’t worry about me”, said Wendy, with a wistful glance towards Jenn’s top row box that sat just a few spaces down from the one belonging to Ben Harrington, the CFO.

“And feel free to climb on my back while I’m down here, you shrimp.”

It was typical morning office banter but delivered with just a touch of tightness in the voice.

“Seriously, I’m glad I ran into you, Wen. Yesterday I found out that I got that promotion, and already they want me to drop everything and leave town for 3 days. I wonder if you’d be willing to stop by my place and check on Mulder? Jürgen is just so ham-handed when it comes to … some things.”

She flicked a glance in Morton’s direction as she said this, and he pretended to be keenly interested in some object deep in his box. Mulder, he supposed, was a pet – possibly a cat – and Jürgen was, as everybody knew, Jenn’s custom model partner. Few but those high up in the corporation could afford a custom model partner. He pictured “Jürgen” as a blond muscular Scandinavian with high cheekbones, a square jaw, and impossibly tiny hips. He would carry his owner towards the bedroom with her skirt pulled up over her head; she, meanwhile, pummeling him helplessly and whimpering with mock anticipatory dread. He quickly ducked out the door to hide his deepening flush just as he heard Wendy promise to check in at 6 Willoughby Lane later that evening.

When he got to his cubicle, Morton noted without surprise that Burton was there before him. Burton Johnson was one of the few people in the corporation even geekier looking than Morton. He was unnaturally thin, with red, greasy hair and an Adam’s apple so sharp and protuberant it might have served as a weapon.

“Morning, Burt,” said Morton, eyeing dejectedly the pile of dongles on his side of the desk. “Thanks for picking up my stuff, I guess.”

“Idle hands….” Burton raised his eyebrows and shot Morton a look of anticipation. Morton obliged him, as he usually did, by adding “are the Devil’s playthings.” Burton had the tiresome habit of speaking in partial aphorisms, which he would expect you to complete for him – the conversational equivalent of a two-man bucksaw.

“Did you hear that JW got the promotion to head of the budget office?” asked Morton, going on to relate how he had overheard the news in the mailroom. “The rich get richer …,” began Burton. This time Morton let the phrase go unfinished. After an interval of silence, Burton turned and went back to work.

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Returning home that evening, Morton remembered Mona’s aggressive form in the morning. He had to admit he was not a fan of some of his unit’s kinkier features, but there were certain ones … The time she had wormed up inside his bivouac tent wearing nothing but her climbing harness, for example. On evenings like these he could end up over her knee while she delivered a stinging mechanism-powered beating and berated him for all his recent lapses. Sometimes it was with her bare hand, sometimes with a paddle, and sometimes with a belt. “Most likely the belt,” he thought, and winced.

He just wasn’t up for it tonight.

Mona would often set traps for him. He might evade one or two of them, but that only meant she was toying with him. Her super-human dexterity and strength could devise traps that would ultimately ensnare him. The very inevitability of his coming punishment was supposed to add sexual spice to the evening.

He knew there was a manual override button for Mona in a closet in the farthest part of the apartment. If by some miracle he could reach it before her, he might be able to switch her off. That would at least salvage the evening, and he might be able to think about how to finance replacing her with a less daunting model. He suspected he was getting too old for Mona.

The entrance hallway ran the length of the dwelling before meeting another hallway. The control closet was just a few yards from the junction. If he could reach the end of the hallway, a quick lunge, pull, duck, and slam maneuver would get him into the closet. He could picture the softly glowing green button that would turn red (and take her offline), if he could only push it in time.

The rooms around him were dead quiet, except for a random drip coming from somewhere. At the far end of the hall, he could see an oddly shaped shadow. Was there a piece of furniture placed so it would cast such a hunched, shadowy figure? He couldn’t remember. Staying where he was didn’t seem productive, so he began to creep down the hallway to the kitchen entrance.

The kitchen was empty except for Benji, his basset hound, who occupied his usual position on the rug at the far side of the room. “Where’s Mona, Benj?” he whispered, taking a tentative step inside the doorway. Benji only stared at him blankly, but as Morton tiptoed onto the rug just inside the door, the dog’s ears suddenly flattened against the sides of his head, giving him a plastered look of comic dejection.

Without thinking, Morton leaped from the rug, just as the snare hidden under it snapped uselessly on empty space where he had been standing moments before. He reeled back into the hallway and reconsidered. With the kitchen now eliminated as a possible hiding place for Mona, he was more certain than ever that the ominous shadow at the end of the hall was hers. If he could just slip into the bathroom next door, he might be able to outflank her when she came to check on the snare and reach the control room before she could react. Holding his breath, Morton sidled into the bathroom, keeping his eyes on the shadow.

Mona stood in the center of the brightly lit bathroom. She was wearing a grey sweat suit, and a whistle was hanging around her neck. She held both ends of a damp white towel, which she had twisted into a tight coil, and which she proceeded to flick sharply in his direction. It hit the wall beside him with a sharp “snap” and sufficient force to raise a small cloud of dust from the grout between the tiles.

“No pain, no gain, chump”, she said between clenched teeth, her flat eyes working up and down the length of him. He tried not the imagine those snaps applied to the surface of his skin, fully expecting a new volley of flicks, aimed with mechanical precision, to begin strafing his flanks. Mona’s thoughts, though, seemed suddenly to veer off in a new direction.

“I’ll go get the rest of my toys, so they’ll be ready when we get started”, she said, striding out the door and throwing the external lock that had been installed for such occasions as these. “You won’t be going anywhere.”

Unnecessary as the last phrase was, he didn’t doubt that it was true. Machines never make mistakes, and whichever of her trillions of programmed behaviors was now in control, it would certainly remember to secure the room properly. He didn’t even bother to try the handle.

Morton suddenly remembered the removable panel under the bottom shelf of the linen closet that gave onto a broad interior service duct. He quickly crossed the room, removed the panel, and wriggled headfirst into a space filled with murky darkness. Calling upon rock climbing skills acquired in his youth, and now beginning to fade, he reached up and inserted some fingers into ventilation holes at the back of the closet. From there he was able to jackknife his torso fully into the shaft. He hung with arms and shoulders already beginning to cramp, and no long-range plan other than that he would probably have to let go at some point.

Morton’s apartment was on the second floor, and he envisioned no more than a yard or so of open space between the bottoms of his feet and the unseen floor of the shaft. Did the building have a basement? That would make the fall jarring indeed, but readily survivable if one were ready for it. Could there be a sub-basement?

The growing agony in his lower arms and the first sounds of Mona rattling the bathroom door decided him. He let go and tried to break his fall by clawing at the side of the shaft. It turned out the building did have a basement, but not a sub-basement, and Morton absorbed the impact surprisingly well by flexing his knees and rolling.

He found himself in a dimly lit and seemingly endless labyrinth formed of vertical shafts like the one he had just descended, alternating with solid structural pillars. Not so foolish as to run straight down one of the aisles in the grid of pillars, when Mona would have spotted him at once, Morton intuitively chose a diagonal path among the pillars – one pillar forward alternating with one to the side. Mona, being a highly intelligent machine, would instantly choose an optimal search strategy. He supposed she might search in spiral pattern. Then she would inevitably find him owing to her far superior speed.

His head swam with the unaccustomed effort of his flight, and he dimly noted the succession of storage areas, electrical and plumbing fixtures, and other infrastructure, as well as a rushing sound that grew ever louder. He soon reached a much larger open area with a hulking dark structure in the middle. The rushing sound, now grown to a throaty roar, came from it. This, do doubt, was the building’s furnace. The doors on its sides were probably for Lars, the building’s dour and methodical semi-robotic custodian.

He noticed that the floor was slightly more worn at one of the entrances, and he instantly ran down the passage beyond. It was a fortuitous choice, as he soon stumbled into a staging area for large equipment with an overhead door. The door was standing open, and he dashed through it and up a ramp to the street.

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Euphoria from having beaten a machine at its own game quickly faded. He still had Mona to deal with later when he returned home, and he might be in for it even worse this time. Did machines feel anger? Even if they didn’t, and only simulated anger accurately, it would make no difference for him.

Partners are, he remembered, part human and part mechanical. He didn’t know exactly which parts because synthetic materials could now be made that were almost impossible to distinguish from the real thing. Probably part or all of the appendages were mechanical, in view of their superior performance, and the central nervous system was just software running on a bio-electronic computer.

Over time, biologists had developed a vestigial human interface. It had taken perhaps a century of careful breeding, selection, and genetic engineering, and had resulted in a kind of torso that sported biological hookups for electronic and mechanical attachments. The living humanoid torso included all areas of common sexual interest and could be grown to suit all kinds of tastes. He had heard that the living torso had its own version of the human reptile brain, with higher functions farmed out to computers on the other side of the interface. “Meat saddles”, they were often called in crude conversations.

He broke out of his reverie abruptly, having wandered into an unfamiliar part of town. A street sign on a corner read “Willoughby Lane”, a name that seemed familiar. Then he remembered 6 Willoughby Lane as the address he had overheard Jenn giving Wendy as he was leaving the mailroom that morning. It didn’t take long to find number 6, a modest but attractive dwelling situated on a well-groomed half acre plot.

Down at the far end of the lane he could see an unnaturally tall figure that could only be Wendy Borg, turning into a park entrance with a small dog beside her. “*Mulder*”, thought Morton. “*I was wrong about him being a cat*.” Jenn’s house must now be empty except for “Jürgen”, and he found himself insatiably curious about Jenn’s custom model partner. Was he the ideal of Nordic male perfection Morton imagined him to be? He simply had to find out, and before he had time to formulate a definite plan, he was knocking on her front door. Soon he could hear footsteps approaching from the inside. The door was withdrawn, and an unprepossessing figure stood in the opening, blinking out at him. It took Morton’s stunned brain a long moment to process the implications of Jürgen’s appearance.

Jürgen was the same height, weight, and age as Morton, but the similarities did not end there. From the thinning hair to the weak chin, to the softening mid-section, Jürgen could have been Morton’s twin. It was as if he were looking into a full-length mirror.

He blushed for the third time that day, as conflicting emotions fought for control. Elation, certainly, was one of them. Amazement, too. Who could have imagined that all along, and against all odds, he himself had been Jenn’s image of the ideal man? Finally, there was simple, raw jealousy, but jealousy of whom? Himself? How could he possibly compete with himself? Yesterday, his chances of striking up a relationship with Jenn had seemed remote. Today, they seemed nonexistent.

“I think I’ve found your dog,” Morton began, casting about in search of a plan.

“An office colleague of Ms. Wolde is walking her dog”, Jürgen said. “They aren’t due back yet, and she seemed quite reliable. I’m sure you have found somebody else’s dog.”

Morton explained that the dog had been there when he left his building, and it had seemed to recognize him and wouldn’t go away. He had taken the dog to his apartment so he could scan the owner information from its subdermal chip. There, unfortunately, Mulder and Benji had bonded on sight, and were now quite inseparable.

“If you came back to my apartment with me, with a leash and one of his favorite things, I think the two of us could get them apart. You could bring your dog back here with you.”

There was no dog, of course. Morton’s ill-formed idea was to send his double in to meet dear Mona. Maybe that would satisfy her. After that, the plan got fuzzier. Jürgen, most likely, would bolt the premises at his first opportunity, and Morton could slip back inside to replace him. With any luck, Mona would be none the wiser, but what would happen on Jürgen’s end was quite unclear. He plunged in anyway, too curious to see what would happen when Jürgen met Mona to care about the details.

Jürgen agreed to accompany Morton back to his apartment. As they approached the door, Morton, seemingly on the spur of a sudden idea, said “Come to think of it, Benji is getting old, and I’m not sure how he’s going to react to two copies of me in front of him. Why don’t you just go in and see if your dog will leave with you? If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to try something else. The dogs are probably in the kitchen. It’s the first door as you go down the entrance hallway. You can just walk right in – don’t worry about your shoes.” Failing to remove one’s shoes was the one transgression most certain to ratchet up Mona’s temper.

He bade a dubious Jürgen slip in at the slightly ajar door and heard tentative footsteps along the hallway, with a sudden pause at about the right distance for the kitchen entrance. There was a low exclamation, followed by more footsteps, followed by a sudden whipping sound and loud shouts of surprise and dismay. “Mona’s snare,” thought Morton, “one of her double bluffs.”

There was a newvoice coming from another part of the apartment, and it bloomed into the foreground with super-human speed. It was Mona’s “thoughtful martinet” voice – precise, determined, controlled – spinning out a list of transgressions serious enough to require the extreme acts of discipline soon to follow. “You lead me on a goose chase through the basement,” it said, “and I nearly break one of my knees trying to catch you, then you expect to waltz back in here like nothing happened? You’re stupider than I thought. Stupid even for a meat-head.”

The ugly and forbidden insult resonated in the air. Then she went on a tirade that grew increasingly shrill, personal, and staccato. No doubt about the ability of these part-human toys to simulate real human anger remained. Jürgen, in his turn, reacted to her use of the nuclear insult by redoubling his protestations. Morton remembered uneasily network discussions about “instability” in some of the more rarely used Mona model routines.

Sounds of physical struggle quickly escalated into the cacophony of pitched battle, punctuated by cries of surprise, sounds of things breaking, and occasional helpless yips from Benji.

He had receded down the hallway and around a bend while all of this was going on, opposite from the way they had arrived, and he expected at any moment to see his double emerge from the apartment. Most likely, it would take off down the hall without even looking around, and Morton might slip back in to replace it. This didn’t happen, and after a while Morton once more approached his apartment door.

He was surprised at the complete silence, and he hung around for a while, unsure about what to do. Eventually, his pragmatic need always to have a plan overcame his fear of the unknown. Quietly, he slipped into his apartment, making sure to close the door behind him quickly. Everywhere there were signs of a colossal struggle that appeared to have quickly escalated into a fight to the death. Bloody body parts alternated with shards of expensive equipment, throwing down an obvious trail. It led to the revolting sight of two mutilated torsi locked in an agonal embrace. His mind shied from the gibbering futile dance of these reptile brain remnants as they strove to obliterate each other.

His most pressing need was to clean up the mess in the apartment. He got some unexpected help from his old climbing equipment, which speeded the several clandestine trips down the duct to the furnace and back. The penultimate of these trips saw the cleaning equipment to a fiery end, and, very sad to say, the remains of Benji followed on the last. Having no visible signs of damage, it appears his old heart had simply stopped at the sight of his master and his playmate trying to tear each other to pieces.

During these labors, which lasted most of the night, Morton’s subconscious mind had formulated a plan. The gist was, after having arranged for a quick resignation from his job, to return to Jenn’s house, take care of Mulder (who would probably be frantic by now), and await Jenn’s return in the person of Jürgen.

Jenn’s return! Morton’s eyes grew moist as he envisioned his coming snuggles with the real Jenn Wolde, but several problems remained. For example, while he might look exactly like her old partner, Morton had no idea how to behave like Jürgen.

When Jenn actually did arrive, he calmly announced that his manufacturers had taken the opportunity of her absence to install a major upgrade to his operating system. Therefore, it was expected there would be some mismatches between new and old behaviors. It was hoped that she would provide retraining as needed. This would only have to be done once, and the long-term benefits would outweigh the short-term inconvenience.

It was a desperate ploy, but to Morton’s surprise, Jenn seemed to buy it. She was too distracted by her return to pay much attention to him the first night, other than to order him to walk Mulder and do other menial chores. The hoped-for snuggle was not forthcoming, but Morton attributed this to the after-effects of a stressful trip.

From there, things only got worse for Morton. He soon found that he missed his weekday trips to the office. Meaningless as the work was, it provided some structured variety to his day. He desperately missed his office friends – even Burton – and their weekly outings. Burton was weak, physically unattractive, and had an annoying personal habit, but he’d trade much of his current life for a little time with Burton.

Worst of all, his regular sexual usage never happened. Jenn, it turned out, had an ongoing flesh-on-flesh affair with Ben Harrington. She had used her partner only as a kind of stress relief. By abusing him after hours, she let off steam from having to kiss up to people she despised all day. In addition to a never-ending stream of verbal abuse, there were “sessions” designed to humiliate and debase him. An enema received on all fours while facing the dog, for example. (There were even worse examples.) The fact that he resembled a loathsome underling from the office only added spice to these encounters, which she often recorded and shared with her circle of online friends.

Several months passed, and with the disappearance of Morton from the office, Jenn’s enthusiasm for tormenting him began to wane. The sessions became less intense and more infrequent. Then one day there was a knock on the door. Morton answered and found two deliverymen from a well-known partner manufacturer. “New custom model for a Ms. Wolde,” one of them said. “Just a few moments while we get him off the dolly and powered up.”

Morton looked at the figure being attended with sick comprehension. “The invoice says we’re supposed to return your current unit for disposal”, the technician concluded, just as he finished work on Morton’s replacement. “My name is Torvald”, the newly risen figure said, stepping into view. He was, as Morton had half-expected, a perfect copy of Burton. Torvald went on: “Sin in haste, …”, he began, raising his eyebrows and rising on his heels as he waited for Morton to respond.