

Upgraded Eyes
(900 words)
by **Dylan Troyer**

It was a beautiful summer day on O street. On one side of the street, rays of sunshine struck grass and trees on the side of a creek, making them seem to glow with a light of their own. On the other, roads branched evenly into suburbs; rows of houses stood with slowly wilting flowers and bushes in their yards. Scant clouds drifted across the sky, the intense sunlight easily broke through them.

Unfortunately, the two figures in the middle of this idyllic scene were not enjoying it in the least. Emily, a girl of fourteen, was tired, sweaty, and sunburned from the long walk to get her service android repaired. Her android, Rob (short for Robot), walked beside her. It observed the area coldly, no hint of emotion showing through its newly upgraded eyes. Together, they walked on through the heat, Emily shuffling along tiredly as the gears and pistons that moved Rob clicked and hissed steadily. Her long blond hair whispered across her reddened neck while her t-shirt stuck damply to her back. The monotony was sharply interrupted when Emily heard a faint shrieking from the bushes across the street.

Emily stopped. Rob stopped beside her. A few seconds passed, and then the shriek sounded again. Suddenly losing her previous fatigue, Emily hurried across the street, towards the bushes producing the strange noise. Peeling back the first few layers of leaves and branches, she was able to see something deep inside the blackberry bushes, “Rob, there’s a bird in here!”

“Yes, it is a Northwestern crow: *Corvus Caurinus*. It appears to have broken its left wing.” The monotone voice stopped speaking.

“We need to save her.”

There was a pause, then Rob cocked its head as it was programmed to do when it had a question, “Why?”

“Why? What do you mean, ‘Why?’” Emily was incredulous.

“Why must we save the crow?”

“Her wing is broken! She’ll die if we don’t do anything!” She was yelling at her robot now.

The machine responded, “That is correct. It will die.”

Emily stopped now, realizing at last what Rob was saying, “You don’t care whether she lives or dies, do you.” It was a statement, not a question.

“That is correct.”

The crow shrieked several times before Emily finally asked, “How?”

Again, the robot paused, unsure how to respond to such an abstract question, “My programming is concerned with the welfare of humans and myself. That is all.”

Her face resolute, she asked, “Will you help me take her to the Avian Center? They’ll actually care about her there.”

“This goes against my basic programming; wild animals can behave dangerously. You may be injured if we attempt to move the crow.”

“I don’t care. We need to save her.”

Another pause, “Your chances of injury are greater alone. I will assist you.” Rob walked through the bushes, blackberry thorns pushing harmlessly against its metal exterior. Gingerly, it picked up the crow, and, shielding the crow with its body, walked out of the blackberry bushes. Emily started walking back towards town, away from her house. Rob followed. They had been walking for several minutes when Rob interrupted the silence, “Emily, do you mind if I ask you a question.”

“No, Rob, not at all.” The android did not hear her anger, nor her sarcasm.

“I have observed in my time with you that humans form emotional bonds with other animals, such as pets, or other humans. Furthermore, you will feel sadness if the thing you are bonded to experiences suffering.”

“All of that is true, Rob.”

“Why, then did you feel sadness for the crow? This was the first time you observed it, there should have been no emotional bond.”

Emily stopped walking, and looked at Rob in disbelief, “Do you really have no concept of empathy?”

Rob looked back, and cocked his head, “Explain.”

“What would you do if you were the crow?”

“I am not a crow.”

“This morning, your eyes broke. You were trapped, alone, and incapable of movement. What did you do?”

“I called for help, so that I could be repaired, and continue my regular functioning.”

“What was the crow just doing?”

Rob was silent while the calculations occurred, “It was calling for help.”

“Exactly! Once you understand the situation she was in, why wouldn’t you want to help her?”

“I did not equate the two scenarios.”

“Start to.”

Rob cocked his head, “Clarify.”

“When you see people doing things that you don’t understand, try to compare it to stuff you’ve done in the past. It might just help.” They continued the rest of the walk in silence. When they reached the Avian Center, a lady behind the desk exclaimed softly when she saw the bird. Emily stroked the crow’s head softly, and said goodbye to her. A veterinarian came out and took the crow back with him. Several minutes passed. The veterinarian came back, and congratulated them on saving the crow. It was expected to have a full recovery, but if they hadn’t acted promptly to save the bird, it likely would have died out in the blackberry bushes. Triumphant and relieved, Emily returned to the long walk home, with Rob following close behind.

Emily was tired, sweaty, and sunburned from the long walk. Her android, Rob, walked beside her. He observed the area thoughtfully, a hint of emotion showing through his newly upgraded eyes.