

2022

Techno-advancement

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Recommended Citation

Schlosser, Zoe (2022) "Techno-advancement," *Exile*: Vol. 68: No. 1, Article 19.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol68/iss1/19>

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Techno-advancement

Zoe Schlosser

They say snowflakes used to be able to touch the ground.

That they didn't evaporate under the intense heat and steam of the overworked machinery the moment they entered the field of the city. That they'd clump together into delicate little ice crystals that bathed the world in a natural white to cover the dirty metallic gray of the synthetic, industrialized streets.

It was snowing today, according to the weatherdroid, as it showcased a screen behind it painted white with the blinding torrent stirring up near the clouds. "Wow!" It exclaimed, antennas buzzing rapidly as it received the script. "It looks really frosty up there! I'm glad it won't make it down here. My gears would freeze."

It was snowing today, according to the weatherdroid. But who knew if it was telling the truth based on an image that could be so easily faked like anything else.

The screens were mesmerizing after a long day of work. It was nice to stare at something other than flesh and organs and blood and the little black text on papers, but Angela broke contact from it after the weather report broke for a soda ad complete with the splashing of red and white liquids thrashing around in an ice glass. The thought of a drink right now was more appealing than watching muffled-quality audio videos through a store window.

Angela followed the sidewalk traipsing with heavy, hurried steps. She hid her face in the collar of her trench coat to save her nostrils from the overwhelming stench of diesel. The smoke from her cigarette shoved past the warm steam rising from the vents that filed into the shadows like cream in a dark pool of coffee. She stood halted at the end of this undisturbed road, devoid of life other than the whirling of machinery and devoid of light other than the neon signs of shops closed for the night, waiting for the light to turn so she could cross the street.

While she was waiting, a slim object whizzed towards her from the intense veil of steam. His bug-like yellow eyes were on her, mesmerizing her, entrapping her in place before she could think to move.

"Miss," it said, maintaining eye contact as it approached her by the curb of the street. Its wheels grated against the metal sidewalk like chalk being forced across a chalkboard. It stopped next to her and hovered there like a mutt looking for scraps. They were entrapped in that stare before it raised up a finger and inquired, "I haven't sold the plate yet. Are you going to buy it?"

Angela took the cigarette from her lips, and rolled it in her fingers, thinking, as her mind worked through the haze clamoring for the clarity of her thoughts. It came to her then. She put the cigarette back in her mouth and blew out smoke. It was that same damn street vendor that was hassling her this morning.

She said she'd buy that machine plate off it after she got off of work because she was aware that the hospital kept her for long hours well into the morning. She'd assume it'd be gone by the time she was making her trip back and she wouldn't have to deal with it. But she'd factored out one detail: it was a droid. Of course a droid would still be here after her sixteen-hour shift. The damn thing didn't have enough of a brain to tell when someone was screwing with it.

The droid said nothing as it sat there, awaiting a response.

"...I don't have money on me," she muttered after a while.

"That's alright," the droid responded helpfully. "I can take it in credit."

Angela looked at the streetlight, ready to abandon the conversation, but it must've turned red again in the time she'd taken to think. She could've crossed. There were no cars other than the ones parked inactive on the roads but she didn't take chances when it came to something as unpredictable as death.

"I don't have the means of carrying it right now."

"We can ship it to your house," it said. "I can get you the papers."

"and the papers."

"Papers? You people want me to sign paperwork right now?!"

She puffed out a cloud of smoke. "I'm not giving you my address."

"I can wrap it up for you. You can come by and pick it up tomorrow."

"-Yes. I promise I'll save her life." Even though she didn't quite believe it. But that's just what you said sometimes when someone was pleading with you.

She growled through clenched teeth as the droid disappeared into the steam. It made her angry how the droid wasn't able to read her cues indicating the fact she didn't want that stupid metal plate. It made her angry how this entitled piece of metal wanted her to keep her word over something so trivial.

The droid returned with a little box that decidedly wasn't bigger than her palm. Angela had drastically overestimated the size of that plate. If the droid were human, it could've exposed her bullshit earlier when she'd claimed she wouldn't be able to carry it.

The droid waited patiently by her side, a box in one hand and a paper and pen in the other. She wanted to cross the street, but the light turned red again.

She turned her head over her shoulder and snarled in a low voice: "I don't want it."

It looked up. "What was that?" it asked.

"I don't want it."

"You don't want it?" it blinked. "Why didn't you tell me before I boxed it up?"

"This entire conversation has been me alluding to the fact I don't want that damn plate," she muttered, a hand pressed against her forehead.

The droid tilted its head, confused. "You never said that. You just don't have any money with you." It raised up a finger, adding: "And you could have just told me you didn't want it."

She huffed and fished around violently in the pocket of her coat until she found her wallet. She opened it up and displayed the nearly stacked bills to the droid. "Well, I lied. I have money." She pulled out two bills, plucked the box out of the droid's hand, and put the bills in its place. "Now piss off."

The droid stared up at her with its beady yellow eyes, its head still tilted in confusion. It looked down at the pen and paper and then at the money. The lights on its antennae blinked. "Thank you," it said before wheeling back off into the steam.

By the time the transaction was over, the light was still red and she had to wait to cross the street.

Angela eventually made her way to her usual bar. The neon sign was broken because over the months the owner never cared enough to get it fixed. The malfunctioning sign put off new customers, but apparently it wasn't hurting the business because Angela saw the regulars here every day drowning away their sorrows until dawn.

She reached for the doorknob, but the door didn't open. She tried again, forcing the handle with her strength, but nothing gave. At first she thought the old shack was breaking down even more like the neon sign, but when she looked down she noticed the small object curled against the door, its head resting against its knees and hands hugged around its face. Angela squinted at it. In the dim light, she almost made it out to be human, before she noticed the crooked antennae attached to the top of its head.

She kicked its leg with her boot. The sound of clanking metal must've woken it up, because it uncurled, stretching out its legs and arms. It looked up at her with white eyes. They were mesmerizing.

A little girl with empty eye sockets. Her amber pupils had rolled to the back of her head after a violent jerk.

It began grinding its metal teeth.

"Knock that off," she said.

It obeyed.

She tried to force the door open again. It opened slightly, before knocking against the droid's heavy body and halting. She opened and closed the little distance she was afforded on the door a few more times, continuing to slam it against the droid's back, but the droid didn't budge.

"Move," she demanded.

It didn't obey. It only stared at her.

It was probably a service droid. Service droids didn't speak. Machinery was only afforded the tools necessary to do its job. And for a service droid, speaking wasn't among those tools.

The droid rolled over a bit and at first, she thought it was obeying her command for it to move. However, it was still blocking the door when it stopped moving again. It pointed at its back, its control

panel exposed. Angela peered at it. To her, it only looked like plates and wires. But something was clearly broken, seeing as some of the bulbs weren't lit up where they appeared that they should.

"I don't know what any of that stuff does," Angela said, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm a doctor. Of humans. I don't cater to droids."

Angela tried to open the door again since the droid had adjusted its position from before, but it still didn't afford enough room for her to enter.

The droid continued to stare at her.

"I can't help you," she said.

Can't help anyone, really.

It had stopped looking at her and was now looking at the box in her hand containing the plate she'd received from the vendor.

"It's not going to do anything," she said. A random part she'd received unwillingly wasn't going to happen to be the miracle solution to her problem. Miracles didn't happen.

The droid began grinding its teeth again.

"Okay! Take it!" she said with some irritation.

She threw the box on the ground. When the droid couldn't quite reach it, she nudged it towards its hand. The droid took it and opened it slowly, delicately extracting the slim, silver disk from the cloth protecting it inside. *It's too small*, she thought. Despite not being a technician, she could see that compared to the other parts inside the droid's control panel, this disk was too small to fit.

This didn't discourage the droid though as it fiddled with the machinery in its back. Eventually, it fitted the plate into its control panel, and a few of the lights came back on. The sound like that of an accelerating engine whirled to life. Angela opened her mouth a little, awed. That awe quickly turned into annoyance.

How easily that random part she'd received was able to fix this droid. After less than a few minutes, the problem had been resolved. People had to sit through hours of tears and anxiety when they needed to be patched up, and sometimes it didn't even work. But machines needed nothing more than a part—a part that *mostly* fit the bill for the system. Perhaps she was in the wrong field.

She held her head. She was going to need a long drink after this.

The droid was off the ground now. It'd hefted itself up and was now standing up straight on its mechanical limbs. It shook a little like it was being jolted by the touch of lightning because the plate she'd given it wasn't exactly the part it needed. It looked up at her.

"I've seen wounds worse than that," she said. "You're going to be fine."