

MY LIVING DOLL

Elke's virtual screen immediately responded to her mind's request. A sales consultant materialized in front of her.

"Welcome to My Living Doll. How can I help you today?"

"Well, I'm thinking about getting a Living Doll for my daughter on her birthday. She'll be seven next month. You probably hear this all the time. Her best friends have Living Dolls, now she wants one."

"Your daughter is a lucky little girl and so is her mom. We have a special on the My Living Doll package this week. I don't want to pressure you, but the special ends tomorrow. Let me show you some of the options popular with our younger owners." The virtual consultant moved to a display counter with selections ranging from biogenetics, to clothes, housing and accessories.

"I'm a little nervous and to be honest, a bit overwhelmed with all the options. Are you sure she's old enough to take on this responsibility?"

"Mrs. Jachna, do you mind if I call you Elkela?"

"Please call me Elke." *My mother's the only one who ever used my given name, especially when she was angry with me. In her case, that was often.*

"Elke, you'll be pleased to know that our research found that children who bring My Living Dolls to life and care for them perform statistically higher on all sections of the New

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World Achievement Test than control groups with either a dog or a robot. Children with a fish, mouse or nothing at all scored the poorest. What is your daughter's name?"

"Yulinka, but we call her Yula."

"A beautiful name. I'm sure you will want Yula to qualify for the 5th Level Curriculum when the time comes. Don't all parents want their son or daughter admitted to that prestigious institution? Really Elke, I wouldn't wait. Yula is already two months behind her peers based upon our data. You wouldn't want to damage her future any further, especially when a sale offer is available for one more day."

"Oh my, I know you're right. It's just that life was so much easier when I was Yula's age. We all got puppies and if they didn't work out, they went to another family or to the adoption center. This seems so permanent."

"Rather than thinking of a Living Doll as a puppy, think of it as a—" with a split second pause the virtual system probed Elke's deepest dreams from childhood, "—a pony. What young girl didn't dream of owning a pony in your day? And, remember, ponies lived twenty-five to thirty years just like My Living Dolls."

"Funny you should mention a pony. I wanted a little palomino filly so much, I cried when I got a puppy instead. I never want Yula to be that disappointed." *And, I sure don't want to go through the turmoil I put my own parents through.* "Okay, I'm convinced. How do we make this happen?"

"Yula will thank you for this over and over again. Let's start with the basics, that is, the biogenetics. Although you can choose any combinations of genetics you want, we find that Living Dolls that look and act more like the family they are born into are a better fit. So, no high

performance athlete dolls for a family of librarians. Have you given any thought to hair, eye, and skin color?”

For the next hour Elke pored over screen after screen of options—not just simple decisions like freckles, dimples and adult height, but tough ones also. Like, is it better to have a Living Doll with the potential to outlive its owner or one with an average lifespan of twenty-five years? In the end, Elke selected a genetic mix with an average lifespan that would look similar to Yula, more like a sister than a twin, and have a high intelligence, musical ability and knack for languages. Elke reasoned that with this set of characteristics Yula’s Living Doll would help her learn to be responsible now and then as a teen, would tutor her so she would have the best chance of admission into the elite 5th Level Curriculum. Elke allowed herself to think about Yula’s bright future. *Perhaps she’ll eventually join the inter-planetary space exploration unit like her dad. That’s where all the glamour and money is these days.*

The sales consultant smiled and for the hundredth time congratulated Elke on her excellent choices. “Now let’s talk about delivery.”

“Can you ship it to our home? I’d like the Living Doll to arrive before Yula’s birthday so I can surprise her with it before her party.”

“Actually Elke, I have something special in mind. Our records show that none of Yula’s friends had this option added to their package. For a small upgrade Yula’s My Living Doll can be delivered to her birthday party by a stork. Our innovative drone delivery storks are techno-replicas of the extinct ones. You would think they were the real thing back flying the skies. Right now The Stork Trilogy is the most popular book series with children Yula’s age. Her friends will be so jealous when her My Living Doll arrives suspended from a stork bill in an old-fashioned diaper. What time do you want the stork delivery?”

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“You’re right. Yula will love impressing her friends. How about delivering the Living Doll at 14:15 on April 10?”

“We’re all set once we get your iris stamp on the agreement. It’s nothing you wouldn’t expect. I imagine your parents signed something similar before they brought your puppy home.” At this point the voice of the sales consultant changed into a legal recitation, “You are acknowledging that My Living Dolls are genetically synthesized organisms which as a species are referred to as *Homo Sapiens Homunculus version 3.0*, and like any other living organism must receive adequate food, shelter and interaction. They are engineered to physically mature at twenty-four months, reaching an adult height not greater than forty-eight inches and a weight of less than ninety pounds. These results are averages and are not guaranteed. Mental maturity is controlled by the owner. The first two knowledge system updates are included in the purchase price. By accepting this agreement you agree to pay for all required updates beyond the first two at the then prevailing rates. The My Living Doll Corporation (hereafter referred to as the Corporation) will notify you of optional upgrades, which may be retroactively required prior to the installation of later updates. The Corporation strives for 100% sterility. The current rate of organism sterility is 92.5%. You agree to spay or neuter your My Living Doll before the age of two should reproductive capability emerge unless you are certified and accepted into our breeding program. The doll you selected does not qualify for this program. If you want to upgrade to a breeding-eligible My Living Doll, select ‘upgrade’ now. An additional fee will be applied. If for any reason your My Living Doll can no longer be properly maintained, you agree to humanely separate from the organism. Euthanization is a legal method of humane separation.”

As Elke blinked at the quick flash recording her iris stamp, she heard a click at the front entry and immediately dismissed her screen. “Yula, I’m glad you’re home.” Elke gave her

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daughter a hug. “Somebody I know has a birthday in four weeks. I wonder who that could be?” Yula smiled and giggled. “How about you finish your homework before dinner? Tonight we’ll pick-out and transmit invitations for your party.”

During the month between ordering Yula’s My Living Doll and her birthday party, Elke could hardly contain her excitement. She knew the egg for Yula’s very own Living Doll was harvested and waiting at the My Living Doll Reproduction Center.

“Yula, your friends will be here in a few minutes. This will be so much fun. I have a special surprise for you.”

Yula smiled displaying a wide gap awaiting her adult front teeth. “Am I getting my own Living Doll? Cammy wanted to bring hers to the party but I said ‘No’. Everyone would give her all the attention. It’s my party, not hers.”

The transport pod arrived precisely at 14:00 and deposited six young girls talking simultaneously in high-pitched voices. Cammy complained that her Living Doll was at home crying. Freedah, whose hair was already pulling loose from its braid yelled, “When do we eat?” The other voices were indistinguishable amid the clamor.

Elke watched thinking, *Some things never change. Take away their Government provided Saturday uniforms and standard issue ergo-shoes, and these seven-year-olds sound just like excited kids from my childhood. How I loved birthday parties.*

Elke herded the girls into the yard just in time for the surprise delivery. At exactly 14:15 a stork with a pink package swaying gently in a diaper suspended from its long beak circled overhead until it was certain everyone’s attention was riveted on its performance. Only then did

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it swoop down and land directly in front of Yula. Not a sound escaped seven small mouths as eyes widened and jaws dropped in amazement.

Yes, I made the right decision. The girls will be talking about this for weeks. Elke allowed herself a brief moment of self-satisfaction knowing this would give Yula an important boost in her already high popularity scores.

The frozen moment was broken by gasps of awe and Yula's claps of excitement. "My own Living Doll. Just what I wanted." The six other girls crowded around Yula to get a better view of the picture on the kit showing the adult Living Doll that would result from Elke's genetic choices.

As soon as the squeals of delight died down, Elke stepped into the circle. "Who wants to help Yula fertilize her new Living Doll?"

Hands went up as six voices shouted, "I do. I do."

"It looks like Yula's Living Doll is going to have six godmothers." Elke had carefully reviewed and memorized the instructions the My Living Doll Corporation sent to her in advance. Although they did everything to make the procedure foolproof, accidents did happen. Failure to follow the instructions exactly as written nullified the warranty. In that case, any birth defects or failure to gestate was not the Corporation's problem.

Elke took a deep breath, "Okay, let's first make the amniotic fluid." One girl poured the viscous fluid into the scientifically designed growth sac. A second friend dropped in the time-release nutrient capsule. Elke carefully situated the sac in the observation stand before Yula took the final step. She inserted the male tube into the female receptacle and gently pressed the release button—the moment of fertilization. Elke then placed the female receptacle into the growth sac.

Moments later it ejected a miniscule fertilized egg. Seven girls watched, captivated as the egg floated through the amniotic fluid before attaching to the side of the growth sac. Elke smiled remembering the emotions she felt as she watched Yula spark to life in her own growth sac at the Human Incubation Center.

Throughout the remainder of the party Elke watched Yula repeatedly wander over to watch her Living Doll. Within an hour subtle changes in its shape and size were visible.

At 16:00 the pod arrived to transport the girls back to their homes. As soon as the entry closed, Yula gave her mom a hug. “This is the best birthday in my whole life. I love you, Mom.” Elke wished she could bottle this moment of innocent joy to someday share it with her husband, Marton.

Six years earlier Marton had left on a mining exploration flight. Yula soon became the center of Elke’s life. Marton’s flight lost its communications link in the second year. Even though this happened periodically on exploratory flights and was no cause for alarm, Elke was lonely and resented the burdens put on her by his absence. This was not their plan. They had agreed to talk daily, just like they had during his earlier shorter duration flights. Now, as a single parent, she felt abandoned. His flight wasn’t scheduled to return for at least another eight years, if not more. It was anyone’s guess when communications might be re-established—if they were re-established, if his flight was safe, if he was still out there somewhere.

Elke put on a good show; it’s what the Government paid her to do. She was the proud Flight Captain’s wife, a role model for the younger wives who were likely sick with worry during their husbands’ first flights. To deal with the pressure, she spoiled Yula shamelessly.

Eight weeks later the Living Doll was a fully developed fetus putting on weight before birth. “Mom, look how much my Living Doll has grown. Is she ready to be born yet?”

“Patience, Yula. One more week. Have you decided on a name? Remember, we have to register her the day she is born.”

“I wanted to call her Sparkle but Simi already used that name. Now, I don’t know.”

“She’s going to be your best friend for a long time. What names make you smile?”

Laughing Yula said, “Pokey or Stupid.” Elke frowned her opinion. “I know, I’ll call her Astra because Astra Virgo is my favorite satellite constellation.”

“Well done, Yula.”

Suddenly the growth sac monitor beeped as a red warning light flashed and Error Code 23Y displayed: PREMATURE BIRTH IMMINENT. The birth system indicator light changed from amber to green. Little Astra was going to be a premie in Living Doll terms—one week premature being equivalent to about a month in human terms.

“Yula, we need to gather everything quickly. The system countdown says Astra will be born in thirty minutes. Thank goodness we’re home. Now run and get her blanket. I’ll set up the bed.”

Exactly thirty minutes later Astra pushed through the sac and emerged with a loud vocal protest. Elke carefully cleaned off the amniotic fluid and removed the placental cord, following the instructions exactly as written. She handed the warm bundle to Yula. Elke remembered the joy of holding Yula the first time, as she watched her daughter cradle Astra in her arms. *No matter how advanced we become, mothers will always instinctually nurture their off-spring.*

Yula was an attentive mother to Astra as the Living Doll learned to walk, talk and develop into a beautiful young woman by six years of age. Elke attended to the details like

having her sterilized and upgrading her knowledge system. She'd read recently that similar knowledge transfers might be approved for use with humans within five years, which would all but do away with the need for the 5th Level Curriculum. *How disappointing. Those years were the best of my life. It's where I met Marton and prepared for my role.*

Over the same six years, Yula matured into an intelligent adolescent with her dad's sense of adventure, but unfortunately not her mom's sense of responsibility. Thank goodness Yula was attentive to Astra's needs during the first year when Astra needed so much care, just like a human baby. Really, it had only been during the past year as friends gained more importance and pressure to be admitted to the 5th Level intensified that her attention had fallen off.

"Yula, did you give Astra her breakfast?"

"Sure Mom."

Elke watched Yula look at her plate and fiddle with her auburn hair. *She's lying to me.*

"Yula, look at me and tell me to my face that you fed Astra."

"Okay, okay. I didn't feed her this morning. I'm already late and I don't have time for you to lecture me again. Can you feed her for me—just today? Anyway, Astra likes to stay home with you. She told me so."

Elke nodded with a sigh, "Just today. Tomorrow Astra goes to school with you like always."

"I love you, Mom." A quick hug and Yula was out the entry.

As she cleared the morning dishes, Elke reflected on her daughter with pride. *She can be a handful some days, but only because Yula is so bright and inquisitive. Thirteen years old and she's already selected for the 5th Level. I wish Marton was here to see how she's grown. Plus, I*

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could use some help teaching her the importance of responsibility. Thank goodness I bought her a Living Doll or she would be totally lacking in this area.

Elke went into Yula's room to let six-year-old Astra out of her unit. It seemed cruel to keep her in the unit overnight, but the My Living Doll Corporation's research found that the Dolls consider it their den and feel safer and more comfortable in their own space. Astra had dressed herself and was patiently waiting for food. Although Elke was certain Astra could feed herself, the Corporation stressed the importance of retaining superiority by restricting access to food.

"Good morning Astra. It's you and me today. Yula was in a hurry this morning. You know how much pressure she's under preparing to start the 5th Level."

Astra's smile faded. "When will she be home? I miss Yula."

"If I remember correctly, she has an extra practice after classes. She won't be home until late." Elke couldn't bear to tell Astra that Yula decided to study with friends tonight. *Better she thinks it's beyond Yula's control. What's wrong with me worrying about Astra's feelings? For crying out loud, she's a Living Doll, a toy, not a person with feelings.*

"Let's get you something to eat." Elke reached down and took Astra's warm hand. Together they walked into the eating area. "Some days when I look at you, I think I'm looking at Yula. The two of you could be sisters."

"Yula told me how you selected my biogenetics to look like her. I'm glad you did."

"Did Yula ever tell you about her dad?"

"Only that she can't remember anything about him. She seemed sad."

"That's understandable. Yula was only a year old when Marton's exploration flight began. He didn't want to leave so soon after his previous trip, but it's not like he had a choice.

He's never been out of contact for so long before. I'm really worried. What if he never comes back? What if I'm here waiting, worrying and then someday I find out he and his crew were vaporized six or eight years ago." Elke stopped abruptly, "I'm being silly. Some days are harder than others. Please don't share this with Yula. There's no need for her to know the dangers."

"Sure, Mrs. Jachna. This is between you and me. You're not being silly at all. I know what it's like to be lonely, to wonder how many hours I'll sit alone and how many nights I'll be lonely even when Yula is home."

"Astra, we need to get out of this house and do something before we both go crazy. I'll call up the transport to take us to the Historical Flight Museum."

Over the next months excursions became a weekly then a daily activity. One afternoon at lunch with the other Captains' wives, Elke absently shared that she was spending an increasing amount of time with her daughter's Living Doll and thought of Astra as a friend. The blank stares around the table brought Elke back to her senses. "What I meant to say is that she's like a visitor who over-stayed her welcome and I have to keep entertaining her. I'll be glad when Yula leaves for the 5th Level and takes Astra with her. It's her Living Doll. Why am I burdened with caring for it?"

Heads nodded knowingly. Stella's daughter lost interest after only six months. Elke remembered how adorable Astra was at that age, giving hugs and learning to ride her first nucleocycle. Stella said it was a relief when they turned over the doll to the Corporation's Adoption Center. Cara's daughter married and left her aging doll at home. Rather than deal with a senile incontinent doll, she had it euthanized. The conversation drifted naturally into what to do with Living Dolls when they are no longer a wanted toy. Elke was relieved her situation had not reached that point.

Before she even got home from the lunch, Elke's conscience was overcome with regret. *I should have been honest and told them the truth. I do think of Astra as a friend. In fact, she's a lot more interesting than anyone in the Captains' wives clique.*

Astra was playing her newest musical score on the magneto-synthesizer when Elke walked into the house. "Astra, your new melody is beautiful and haunting. I start to tear up every time you play it."

"I'm glad you like it. I decided to go back to the pentatonic scale and stress the harmonic themes. I think the emotional pull is stronger this way. Enough about my music, how was your luncheon?"

"I am so ashamed of myself. In the middle of a light-hearted, meaningless conversation I shared that I think of you as a friend. It was suddenly so quiet you could have heard the temperature drop. When I realized my blunder, I lied and said you're a burden and that I'll be glad when you're gone to 5th Level with Yula. Astra, forgive me. You really are a friend."

"Elke, you did what you had to do. It's okay. I know most people think of dolls like me as insentient robots. But I have feelings. I get happy, sad, angry and afraid just like anyone. Surely you realize I love you and Yula. You're not just my best friends, you're my family."

Two weeks later the day arrived for Yula to board the transport to the 5th Level Curriculum.

"Mom, I don't think everything will fit into my travel pod. Maybe Astra should stay here with you until next year. Sixth Level students have bigger rooms."

“Don’t worry Yula. Everything will fit including Astra. After all, she’s your language tutor. I wouldn’t want you to fall behind and risk being rejected your first year. That’s even worse than not being accepted in the first place.”

“Most of my friends aren’t taking their Living Dolls. There were some issues last year. Cammy said the university almost banned them.”

“I never knew Cammy to be the most reliable source of information. If there’s a problem the university would have let us know. Now let’s get you and Astra to the transport station.”

After Yula’s travel pod was loaded into the university’s transport and Astra placed in the humane hold, Elke gave Yula a farewell hug. She watched teary-eyed as her daughter raced away to join a group of friends at the threshold of the transport. Out of habit Elke reached down to take Astra’s hand. Only then did she realize the small comforting hand she had come to depend upon was absent. For the first time in her life, Elke was alone. Her husband remained *ex-communicata*, her daughter was racing to her own future and sweet Astra was there by Yula’s side. The hairs on Elke’s arm stood on end as she thought, *I’m alone and already lonely*.

To take her mind off her current situation, Elke reminisced about her year in the 5th Level. She entered as a naïve teenager and ended as an independent young adult. The regimen was strict but necessary to prepare the future generation of scientists and leaders. There was little time for non-curricular activities, no weekends at home and absolutely no unscheduled communications.

Without her responsibility for Yula and conversations with Astra, Elke found less and less of interest. She skipped the Captains’ Wives’ Luncheon two months in a row. She begged off the first time due to illness. The second time she had to get more creative. The Government required her attendance unless specific exceptions applied. Illness was one. Attendance at a

higher level function was another. Her husband's friend in Secret Surveillance covered for her the second time, inviting her to a fictitious meeting.

After six weeks she was miserable. Her first communication with Yula was scheduled at 13:00. Elke managed to drag herself out of bed, shower and dress around noon. She ate a meal bar and sat in front of the communication system waiting to hear from Yula. At 13:00 nothing happened. She continued to wait. 13:15 still no call. Finally, at 13:25 her system alerted her to an incoming call from the 5th Level. Elke sat up straight with a surge of energy.

"Mom, it's me, Yulinka."

"Yula, it's so good to hear your voice. I've missed you terribly. You look wonderful. How's the 5th Level going?"

"It's tough, but you know that already. I love every minute. Hey, I don't have much time. Our break is in two weeks. Can you meet me at the transport?"

"Of course, I'll be there for you and Astra. By the way, how is Astra enjoying her new life?"

"Can't talk now. See you in two weeks."

The communication system announced: CALL ENDED 13:28

Elke stared at the screen wanting it to recreate her daughter. Silence. Elke lay down on the sofa and escaped into sleep.

The day before Yula and Astra were due home on break, Elke ordered their favorite meals and snacks. Her kitchen hadn't been stocked this full in months. She had the house cleaned and linens refreshed. Elke could hardly contain her excitement. She felt a twinge of guilt when she asked herself, *Are you more excited to see Yula or Astra?* An honest answer would not come. *Yula's my daughter, of course I'm more excited to see her. But, Astra is my dearest friend. For*

the first time, Elke admitted to herself that Astra was not a toy. Astra was a living being and the best friend she'd ever had.

Elke arrived at the station just as the transport pulled into its disembarkment gate. Two dozen or more young men and women exited. Each wore the prestigious 5th Level uniform and walked with confidence—chin level, eyes forward and head shorn. Elke remembered her own thick auburn hair falling in piles of curls during the Week Seven Induction Ceremony. *Was it really twenty years ago? Some things stay the same, especially 5th Level rituals. Only the brightest and toughest make it through the first six weeks and experience the induction.*

In the last group to exit, Yula emerged with a new group of friends. *That's one thing I never have to worry about. Yula attracts friends like a magnet.*” Elke waved to get Yula's attention then rushed to meet her at the exit gate.

“Yula, I'm so glad you're home. I can't believe how much you've changed already. Let's get your baggage and pick up Astra, so we can relax and catch up on news.

Yula looked down. “Sure, let's get my baggage. I only brought a small travel pod.” She quickly walked over to the claim area and grabbed her pod. “Let's go. Astra isn't with me.”

“What did you just say? I don't think I heard you.”

“I said, Astra isn't with me. Now don't get upset over something minor and spoil my break. I'll explain when we get home.”

“You're right. I've been emotional lately. It was harder than I thought it would be not having you and Astra around.”

Yula settled back into her old room and Elke directed her newly acquired home-bot to heat Yula's favorite meal, their first meal together in two months. Five minutes later they sat

down at the table and Yula started talking—non-stop with stories of new friends, classes, pranks and her latest crush.

Elke listened with pride, but also with sadness as she sensed her daughter pulling away to become an independent young woman. “Yula, tell me about Astra. Who is she staying with over break?”

“She’s fine.” Yula looked at her plate and reached up to fiddle with her hair out of habit.

She’s lying to me. “Yula, you’re not telling me something. What’s going on with Astra?”

“Actually, nothing is going on with Astra. I don’t have her anymore.”

Elke’s chest tightened causing her voice to assume a strident pitch, “What do you mean you don’t have her anymore? She’s been your closest companion for over six years. I don’t understand how you can sit there and casually tell me Astra’s gone, like she meant nothing to you.”

“Mom, calm down. You’re acting like Astra’s a person. She’s a toy. T-O-Y. Not only that, she wasted too much of my time. I never wanted her in the first place. This is all about you and what you want. It’s about you being lonely and Dad being gone. That’s not my fault. I never should have come home.” Yula shoved her chair aside, face tense, fighting back tears. “I’m going to my room.”

“Not so fast young lady. I’m still your Mom and I deserve a better explanation than you’ve given. Now sit down and tell me exactly what happened.”

Yula grabbed her chair and slouched in the seat. “Okay, I’ll tell you what happened to your precious Astra. She hated 5th Level. Between classes and study groups I was gone from morning to night. She was alone for hours. Astra simply couldn’t handle it.”

“Why didn’t you take Astra to class with you like we discussed?”

“What? You want me to look like a five-year-old dragging a doll around? I did what was responsible. Isn’t that what you always nag me about? ‘Yula, do what’s right, no matter the consequences.’ So I did, but that’s not enough for you.”

“Stop it, Yula. I’ve never seen you act like this. Without your sarcasm, tell me where Astra is right now.”

“I can’t because I don’t know. A guy in my Astrophysics class introduced me and another classmate to a man in town who buys Living Dolls. He handled all the adoption papers. When it was done, he transferred crypto-currency to my account. It was easy.”

“Oh no! Yula, you didn’t. Haven’t you heard about these syndicates? More are exposed every week. For every legal and humane one, six are selling Living Dolls into the sex market or as astro-mining slaves. Either way, it’s a death sentence.”

“Mom, don’t look at me like that—like I did something wrong. I thought you’d be proud of me. Anyway, it’s done. Adoption papers are sealed. You need to move on.” Yula walked to her room and slammed the door.

Elke couldn’t cry. She stared in stunned silence at the dirty dishes from Yula’s homecoming dinner. She lacked the will even to direct her home-bot to clean up. Her mind vacillated from the sickening fact that the adoption was irreversible to debilitating grief. *Dear sweet Astra, I’m so sorry. I should have seen this coming.*

Two hours later Elke turned out the light and curled up on the sofa, alone and lonely.

The End