

 機器人  
**The Robot**

1

WANTED: for cinema advertising. Fit, healthy hard worker free from vice. Apply at Publicity Department, XX Road. \$20 daily wage for successful candidate. Meals provided.

2

Lin Chunshou walked out of the ward as the nurses wheeled Li'l Q into the operating theatre. The doctor said, 'There is nothing for you to do now. Why don't you take a walk outside?'

Li'l Q was lying on the gurney at the door of the operating theatre, his eyes wide with visible terror. In a quivering voice, the little one pleaded, 'Ah Pa, you promised to get me a big doll after my surgery. You won't forget, will you?' Chunshou smiled and nodded as the nurses closed the door.

Time passed by ever so slowly. Anxiously, Chunshou paced the corridor outside the operating room. Reaching into the void of his pockets, he thought, 'I can't break my promise to Li'l Q. I said I'd buy him a doll, and I must do so. But how do I get the money?'

Borrow from friends? He had none. Since he had been let go by his towkay at the brokerage company more than a year ago, he had been unable to secure a steady employment. A jobless man has no friends.

But he had to come up with some money now. Even if it meant he had to starve, he must get Li'l Q a doll no matter what.

He hastily walked to the lift and went downstairs, and asked to use the phone at the reception desk to call Mr Dong, his teacher from his secondary school days.

'Is this Mr Dong? Sir, I am ... I am Chunshou. Lin Chunshou. I am wondering if I may ...'

His face reddened and he swallowed the words at the tip of his tongue along with his spittle.

‘Oh, Lin Chunshou,’ Mr Dong recalled. ‘It’s been a while since I last saw you. How have you been?’

‘I ... I ... I was wondering if ...’

‘Yes?’

Lin Chunshou had wanted to borrow twenty or thirty dollars from his teacher, but didn’t have the courage to broach the subject. Instead, the words that came out were, ‘I was wondering if ... you could recommend me for a job.’

Mr Dong gave the request some thought over the phone, and replied in a low voice, ‘Our school is overstaffed at the moment, so it wouldn’t be easy to fit you in, but I have come across a small job ad in *Nanyang Siang Pau* today. Why don’t you have a look? Give it a try if it suits you.’

After hanging up, Lin Chunshou wandered into the waiting room. He took a copy of *Nanyang Siang Pau* from the newspaper rack, and sure enough, the ad was in it.

The considerable twenty-dollar daily wage made his heart race.

### 3

Lin Chunshou hurried out of the hospital and caught a bus to the cinema at the address printed in the ad.

He found the publicity department, where there were already three applicants ahead of him, amongst them a Malay man.

Mr Chen, head of publicity department, was a thin-faced scrawny man. His voice, however, was loud and booming. A cigar was hanging in his mouth as he briefed the applicants on the job.

‘Our cinema will be screening a blockbuster called *The Battle of the Robots in the Dark Pine Forest*. To drum up publicity, we want to hire a healthy and tough hard worker to dress up as a robot. His job is to stand at the cinema entrance from eleven in the morning to ten at night to attract moviegoers. Except during the two meal-breaks, he is not allowed to leave his post, especially before the start and after the end of every screening.’

‘We will have to be on our feet for eleven hours every day?’

‘You just stand still on the spot and think of yourself as a robot. No facial expression required.’

A long awkward silence ensued, which was ultimately broken by the sighs of the three applicants who shook their heads and exited the room, leaving only Lin Chunshou behind.

The department head shot him a sideways glance and asked, 'Tell me, are you up for the job?'

Lin Chunshou hesitated and finally stammered, 'Please Mr Chen, I'd like to have two days' wages in advance.'

'What kind of talk is that? You want to get paid before you've started work?'

'You see, my child has suddenly fallen ill, and is undergoing surgery at the General Hospital. I promised to buy him a doll.'

The department head gave the request long and hard consideration before he consented, 'Fine, you'll start work today. By ten o'clock this evening, I will pay you forty dollars. That's both today's and tomorrow's wages. But you'd better not take the money and not show up tomorrow.'

Lin Chunshou was grateful to the brink of tears. The department head immediately had him don a premade robot costume and get to work right away under the hot sun outside the entrance. The costume was heavy and he felt dizzy under its weight.

By ten o'clock that night, Chunshou was exhausted. Mr Chen paid him his forty dollars as promised.

He rushed to Happy World amusement park, bought a big doll from the toy stall, and hopped on the bus to the General Hospital.

After talking to the nurse, he found out that Li'l Q had come out of surgery and was in excellent condition. Chunshou wanted to go in to see him, but the nurse said, 'He is sound asleep now and should not be disturbed. Come back tomorrow morning.'

Not feeling like going back home, Chunshou decided to sit by the ward door and take a nap. As he held the doll, his mind was flooded by waves of thought, memories that pained him.

It was half a month ago that he had a fight with Xianglin. Incensed, she had mentioned 'divorce' whenever she opened her lips, but Chunshou would not accede to her demand, so she took their elder child Big Q to live with her family

in Johor Bahru. For the past two weeks, Chunshou had repeatedly attempted to reunite, but Xianglin rejected him each time.

In a fit of anger, Chunshou rang Xianglin long distance, and cooked up a story that he had met someone new, and that he was willing to go see a lawyer any time. It was around this time that Li'l Q developed acute appendicitis. Chunshou was at his wits' end, and thankfully managed to take care of the medical bills after pawning his wedding ring, the only thing of value he had.

But Xianglin knew nothing about this. He had kept her in the dark because he did not want to worry her.

Li'l Q might be out of danger now, but how would they cope with the days ahead?

## 5

All night he ruminated on his troubles until he heard a rooster crowing in the distance. The dawn was breaking outside the window to the east; everything was bathed in the hazy morning light. When he opened his sleepy eyes, the nurse was standing before him. 'Your son is awake,' she said, 'you can go in to see him now.'

Chunshou quickly got to his feet, patted down his dishevelled hair, straightened his back, and mustered up a loving fatherly smile. With the doll in his hands, he tiptoed into his son's ward. As soon as he saw his father, Li'l Q was over the moon, grinning broadly. Chunshou placed the doll next to his pillow, making Li'l Q so happy that his beaming eyes welled up with tears. When he asked where his father had got the money from, Chunshou told him all about his gig as an 'advertisement man'.

## 6

At eleven o'clock, Chunshou showed up on time at the cinema. Mr Chen patted him on his shoulder, commending him for being a man of his word.

After putting on his robot costume, he stood under the hot sun and kept himself very still, as he let passers-by stare at him.

A woman pointed at him and said to her husband, 'I can bet you this is a real person.'

Her husband disagreed: ‘How could it be? If there were really a person inside, what an agony it would be! How could a person stand this miserable equatorial heat?’

He listened to more of such dialogue as it played out around him, but could only keep staring ahead blankly. The one thought in his head was: ‘How are we going to survive?’

Suddenly, he trembled at the sight of two familiar faces in the crowd.

It was Xianglin! And his son Big Q.

Big Q pointed at his father, saying, ‘Ma look! A robot, how interesting!’

Xianglin, though wearing a plain cheongsam, appeared to be more beautiful than ever.

Chunshou looked at her.

She looked at Chunshou.

Chunshou did not utter a word. He was a robot. How could a robot speak?

Xianglin said to him in a low voice, ‘I have just come back from Johor Bahru. I hope you can forgive me for all the things I have done. I went home, our home, but you weren’t there. The landlord said Li’l Q fell ill. I rushed to the General Hospital and he told me you are here, so I came.’

Chunshou still stood there, rooted to the ground, wordlessly looking at Xianglin.

Xianglin continued, ‘The nurse said Li’l Q can be discharged the day after tomorrow. We should get ourselves together after that. Chunshou, I know things haven’t been easy for you. You have wanted to make something of yourself, but this harsh society just won’t give a good man a chance.’

Chunshou still did not say a thing, but he could feel his emotions welling up like the tide.

Suddenly, one of the bystanders exclaimed, ‘Look! The robot is crying!’

