

## Day of Rest

### MONDAY

Ruth had no idea how to befriend her replacement and little time to find out. There were distractions: The emotional goodbyes to the coworkers with whom she had shared thirty-one years on the line assembling SnackCakes. The clearing of her employee locker of its Lady Devotionals and In Case Of underwear stash. The tucking away of SnackCakes for a later date. If Ruth wanted to ride off into the sunset, if the sunset was Ruth's RV behind the new Steak-and-Eat, Ruth had better chop-chop. 5 p.m. Friday was coming on quick.

Ruth first approached her replacement like any God-fearing woman would, placing her human hand on the robot's end effector and reading from Leviticus, embellishing the men lying with other men, the submission of wives to their husbands as one submits to the Lord, the loving of thy neighbor, and the burning of the skins. Leviticus was a double-disc of greatest hits.

But the robot, given name Roxxanne, had no reaction. Not to the slaughtering, the blood, or even to the forbidden man-lying. *Roxxanne: A User Guide*, which Ruth studied over Cranberry-Morsels, said nothing about what to expect when informing Roxxanne of the Good News. What it did say:

Do not dress your Roxxanne.

Do not feed your Roxxanne.

In event of Roxxanne malfunction, contact Maintenance.

So Ruth called up Maintenance to ask about the state of Roxxanne's breasts, vague lumps of plastic composite at attention. Ruth inquired about the robot's modesty, whether it would be all right to go on and purchase a gift for her replacement (modest slacks, linen tops, etc.). Ruth felt, as expressed through her Inside Yelling Voice, that a grown robot charged with making Nutty Crunch Bars With and Without Peanuts! at a quantity of seven cartons per hour should not be nude.

Ruth normally liked Maintenance, especially Joe with that mustache, a handle-looking puff Ruth might pull if she got too carried away. How wonderful were Joe's jokes? Just the sort of thing this country needed. More Joe. Less daughter with her skimpy jeans and offensive pins and many petitions to town hall. Eliminate trash pick-up! Replace annual

many petitions to town hall. Eliminate trash pick-up! Replace annual Christmas Trees Lighting with Friendship Fence! What in the good heck was a Friendship Fence is what Ruth wanted to know. A fence made of friends? Would Carly light up the friends? Did Carly even have friends?

“My daughter? I try to tell her. You’re a mom now. Zip it up,” Ruth explained to Roxxanne.

Roxxanne, blank-faced, attempted to inspect a batch of Roll-Ups with Cinnamon Glaze. Her end effector whirred about in a deranged half-circle. Her mouth hole grunted, sounding a whole lot like Ruth’s late husband in the midst of a constipation event.

Joe was useless (she’s a robot, who cares if she’s naked?), but nudity in any form was an issue in need of rectification. Look to Matthew. The spirit is willing, yet the flesh is weak. Of course, Matthew hadn’t considered Roxxanne’s brand of imitation flesh, recycled from sports drink bottles and gym socks. Matthew hadn’t known the technological possibilities of chemistry, patented by pricey lawyers and packaged for home use, both helpful and sordid. But still. Matthew predicted the troubles of the modern man.

“Oh did he ever,” Ruth said as she attempted to wipe Roxxanne’s oozing nostril.



At lunch, Ruth found George grumbling in Break Room C-8 about some such Free Speech warning. “Sure, I agreed to my big boy severance, and fine, replace me with those E.T. phone home things, but don’t you dare tell me I can’t speak my mind.”

Ruth tried to be a good listener for the larger-than-normal guy who lacked a proper moral compass and whose wife left him for the female manager of the Auto Barn. Could Ruth say for sure that George’s obesity and grumpy disposition weren’t deserved? What did George think would happen if he shunned the Lord for weekends up north? Perhaps George should spend less time studying the On Demand lineup and more time on the Word.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing much, nothing too much,” George said, and scratched at his shiny forehead.

“You out Friday, same as me?” Ruth sat across from George, spreading out her lunch. Macaroni salad, twelve almonds, seasonal cut fruit, all contained within Lock-n-Totes, purchased from the Ladies Group fundraiser to benefit the pantry’s mission of bringing the nutritious word of God to hungry folks.

George leaned over the table, the smell of a Meats Supreme sub coating chapped lips. “You ever wanna fuck up some shit?”

Ruth choked on her third of twelve almonds.

“God knows I am against vandalism. Grandmama’s rolling over in her grave right about now. But what if I junked up my Jam Blobber, sent the whole day’s output to crap? Mr. Manager’s gotta come home early from his ‘networking?’”

“Yeah, well, maybe,” Ruth said.

“Can’t you see it? Brockster’s storming on down, looking me in the eye. I’d be all tough. ‘Oh, hey there man. Do you even know my name? Do you? Do you?’”

“I’m sure he does. He’s good with names,” said Ruth.

“Oh, Ruth. Funny. Very funny.”

## TUESDAY

Ruth presented Roxxanne with a Life Lesson: A Girl She Once Knew. This girl chose to audition for a rock ‘n’ roll band, her vocal talents a gift straight from our Father. But this girl also understood the band members, with their V-necks revealing upper privates, to be bad news. So she said no to the rock band offer even though the band would’ve been delighted to have her, might’ve won a band battle or sung in a mall. But this girl wasn’t sad nor regretful for what might’ve been. When the Lord lights in one’s life, there’s no regret.

Ruth had once a wild streak and a deep, smooth voice in which she belted moody songs about rain. Ruth had once ambitions beyond the town’s SnackCake factory in which her father and brother and adopted second cousin, Levi, worked. But Ruth tamed that streak as an answer to God’s call, about which she first learned in Bible Camp. Tiff, counselor with stylish bell-bottoms, instructed Ruth in Crafts and told ghost stories of sinful women being date-raped or choking on cherry soda.

So Ruth fell into line on the line, busting her butt all the way up from Assistant Cleaner to Assistant Line Baker and now to Senior Line Baker who oversaw a whole crew of them out there. All was to the plan of retirement at sixty-five until last month when Brock called a meeting. The line would be replaced by Roxxannes in a not-optional early retirement package.

## FOUR TUESDAYS AGO

“Now don’t think for one minute your role isn’t valued. Your hard work here at SnackCakes makes us work,” Brock said. He was vacuum-sealed into dress pants and an official SnackCakes polo.

Ruth had been eating a Doodle Wafer, sipping tea with extra milk, patting her lips with a napkin whenever she felt the excess buildup of powdered sugar.

“Mr. Gibbons, myself, and all the management team are gutted. Now of course, taking early retirement is a wonderful thing. Now you can golf. That’s right, Earl! I know where you were the last few Fridays. And garden! Donna? Donna? There you are, Donna! How ’bout that butter lettuce? How ’bout those tomatoes? Round of applause for Donna’s tomatoes. Hands up if you loved Donna’s tomatoes,” said Brock, legs spread, hands on his hips like a man embarrassed to be waiting for the bus.

All around hands went up.

Even George’s!

George, who Ruth knew had never eaten a tomato or any vegetable in all of his life.

Even Ruth’s.

Ruth, who hadn’t eaten Donna’s tomatoes and never would. Last summer, Ruth saw Donna on her second of two fifteens reading that flimsy “newspaper,” enjoying all the liberal lies while chomping on a Granny Smith. So Ruth went right on home and put those tomatoes on the windowsill where they eventually shriveled into yellowed mounds of mush.

But early retirement was a gift, wasn’t it? A blessing to be sure. Unblemished days in which to read scripture, in which to spread out a breakfast feast of biscuits and jams from the Ladies Faire. Days in which to take the grandkids to the mall if Carly allowed them to participate in what she called “Unchecked Corporate Greed.”

## WEDNESDAY

Ruth exemplified for Roxxanne the Assembly WorkFlow, from the Pastry Sizer to the Jam Blobber. Ruth showed Roxxanne how to lay the mounds of ChocoCrunch against the roller, a giant funnel-shaped machine that twisted the SnackCake bestseller into its signature layers. “You, dear, are one step in seventeen.” Ruth showed Roxxanne the tricky reset lever. “Sometimes, the tubes’ll get gummed up. This is fine. Insert your finger, and pull. Understand?”

Roxxanne’s head twisted 180 and with a long beep, powered into standby. A blue light in Roxxanne’s ear blinked: FUNCTION BAD. Ruth wasn’t concerned. She had been here before.

“One time my daughter ignored me for thirty-three days. Refused to eat. Didn’t shower. Played hooky from the Lord. All because I prohibited her attendance at a social event.”

Roxxanne’s blue light brightened then dimmed. A steady pace: FUNCTION GOOD.

“What sort of fifth grader needs to stand vigil for political dissidents anyway?”

The blue light flashed four times.

“Exactly,” Ruth said, and twisted the ON button at the base of Roxxanne’s thick skull.

Ruth looked into Roxxanne’s eye holes, endless and black. Ruth brushed her finger against Roxxanne’s toothless mouth, a mouth that would never smile, never kiss. Who did Ruth think she was, swooning about kissing on the clock? A woman like Ruth hadn’t been kissed in decades. Unless you counted Pastor John Lee.

Pastor John Lee.

Ruth decided right then to bring reject SnackCakes to that night’s Ladies Group. Pastor John Lee would take Ruth’s shoulders and say, “Ruth! Your gifts do not go unnoticed.” Then Pastor John Lee, whose wrinkly neck struggled against the tight collar of his shirt, would lean in and brush his chapped yet damp lips against Ruth’s cheeks.

That night, Ruth would buy 2BYoung serum off the TV.

## THURSDAY

Brock checking in.

“What a beauty!” Brock patted Roxxanne’s shiny head where waves of metal came together in a ponytail. “And how’re we doing on Doodle Wafer output?” Brock moved his hand to Roxxanne’s shoulder as she improperly flipped a Doodle Wafer off its mold.

“Having some trouble,” Ruth said.

George over at Packaging Unit 1 waved.

“OK, but how about showing her over and over again until she’s got it down?” Brock patted Roxxanne’s head, then reached down to pat Roxxanne’s backside. “How hard could that be, Rebecca?”

How hard?

How hard, Brock?

Ruth (*Rebecca!*) Marie Lambson, age fifty-four, has only spent her adult life performing the same task. Only started every morning by stepping into her protective suit, twisting her curls into a hideous hairnet, careful to pull the elastic around her sagging ears, hurrying to relieve Miss Mona from her night shift. Only examined 32,101 pounds of pastry dough, confirming proper measurements (2x2) and symmetry (square) of the double-rolled dough patty. If said patty was off by even the smallest margin, say .001 inches, hadn’t Ruth the power to release the misfit into a mechanical vortex where it would travel over a mile to the Reject Depot? Hadn’t Ruth done all this, plus cover shifts for co-workers? Hadn’t Ruth covered for JoAnn when JoAnn needed a day to lounge around watching soaps before picking up her kid from rehab? Hadn’t she done all this five days a week for more than half her life, enduring aching in her wrists, the swelling of her feet? All of this for what? For money? Hardly would Ruth survive on the government check and her small retirement savings, gutted after the housing burst,