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about 1700 words

DON'T TRUST 'EM

by Lance Arthur Smith

I don't think people should trust Roombas. Do you know why? They are truly, truly, evil. I know. I've lived with them most of my life. I'm ten. That's a lot of Roombas.

We got our first one when we were living in Spain. Mom visited a friend of hers who had one. It was real handy, she said. The smallest vacuum you've ever seen. And intelligent. It somehow knew where all the dirt and dust was and could pick it up immediately, scour around for more, and go charge itself in the wall outlet. So Mom bought one.

Mom told us about it and "tada!" set it up in the house without even asking us. It was small. That was good. No handle on it, either. It was like a little flying saucer, but

gliding on the ground. It was definitely some sort of robot, but the most advanced one I've ever encountered in my technological career.

At first it seemed good because Mom didn't make us vacuum. But it was strange that no matter how big an item you dropped, the Roomba would pick it up. And I didn't know how it emptied its contents, how it managed to pick up more and more debris day after day.

I fell asleep on the floor while watching TV and Maddy, our cat, slept on top of my head. She always did that. I'm not sure how long I was asleep but it was probably a long time. Every so often I'd hear a little whirring noise. It was annoying but I had to sleep because Star Wars marathon was on and I watched two and a half of them. When I opened my eyes our Roomba was inches from my nose. It just sat there, softly whirring. My cat was long gone, but her hair was everywhere. I was normally allergic to cats but I got used to Maddy's hair a long time ago. Well after a couple minutes the Roomba turned away and started sucking up all of Maddy's hair.

This went on for a few days. And I have to admit- the floor was cleaner that it was when Grady or me cleaned it. But as great as this was, we couldn't find Maddy anywhere. We normally looked for her in the laundry basket because she loved the fabric softener smell (that's my theory, but Grady says cats don't understand clean and comfy clothes). Maddy wasn't there, and I thought she might be under the sink. She wasn't. And we never let her outside.

We never found her, and after about another year we moved back to California. Mom's business brought her back to their office because my mom rules. She's really good at her job. It's something to do with finding other people jobs.

So we moved, but we couldn't bring the Roomba with us. It broke. And when Mom opened it up to repair it, its insides were all on the outside. It was almost like it ate too much and burst. The only thing we found was Maddy's tag. Mom yelled at me and said that I left it out and that the Roomba scooped it up and it broke. *Mom was wrong.* I decided that the Roomba ate Maddy and it had a bad reaction to her tag.

I was glad to be rid of the Roomba and even though I missed Maddy I was glad she didn't have to deal with the demon robot vacuum. But I was sad she got herself eaten.

Mom forgot about the Roomba for a long time. At least four months or a year. I don't remember. But then for their anniversary, Dad bought her the newest model and then left again. It was humongous. I think. Maybe it was the same size, but it seemed bigger. It was definitely faster and more powerful than our last one. And hungrier too.

The move to California brought with it another cat. Juliet. After the Roomba came, she only lasted a matter of days. She used to love the sound of my pretzel sticks tinkling against my metal Incredible Hulk lunchbox. It was a good lunchbox. It was Dad's when he was my age and it still worked pretty well. I lost it last year and I'm mad about it, because it was gamma powered. It was so strong it would break apart the little baggies Mom put the pretzels in. And Juliet would follow me around. I wasn't too happy about her, because she didn't knead the sheets like Maddy.

Juliet was gone and it was just me, Grady and the Roomba. Grady felt she was too old to believe that the Roomba could be evil. I tried for months to explain to her how the Roombas were clearly advanced technology from some future society. Possibly alien. I could tell she was considering it, especially when I mentioned the strange light patterns it let off. Like it was playing a game of Simon with itself. Do you know that game? The

four colors light up and you have to push the same color buttons. If you don't, that's okay. It's a fun game. Well Grady thought about it, and then said it must be a random pattern and doesn't mean anything. Lame.

Well this new model Roomba meant business. And it let us know. Oh yes, believe my words- it could talk. It would say things like "inspect cliff sensors" and "uh-oh." "Uh-oh" was right. Eight GI Joes, include Snake-Eyes' wolf Timber- gone. Sucked up by that thing. I didn't actually see it, but they were in the corner of my room and then the next day they were vaporized. And that was the only clean corner of my room. So there's that little piece of evidence. Uh-oh.

The Roombas came fast and furious, and the less we saw of Mom. She didn't need to wash the kitchen floor because there was this "Scooba" model that mopped up everything. Spilled spaghetti sauce was no problem. Scuff marks from my black-soled high tops. And mud. I love mud, and since it doesn't rain a lot here in sunny California (the postcards are right) I have to make my own. I generally like sandbox dirt and mix it with the hose, but any dirt'll do. Now in the way old days before Roombas, mom used to ground me if I got mud all over the floor. But since the robots, she's a lot more understanding.

Now we're in a pilot program and not the cool kind where you test things like Hal Jordan. He's the Green Lantern of sector 2814, which includes Earth. This pilot program just tests a new kind of Roomba that, I'm not kidding, makes it so Mom and Dad are around the least they've been since we moved back to California. This new model is called a ConnectR, and it's got a little camera and a little microphone. It connects itself to the internet where we get tucked in by mom and, not too often, Dad.

I was fed up. Early on a Sunday morning, I grabbed my Louisville Slugger aluminum baseball bat and started defending my family against these invaders. I caught all the Roombas gathered around this tiny one, which worked on stairs. It was clearly the boss. The mastermind of the whole sucky gang. As soon as he saw me coming, he unleashed his minions. I was overwhelmed. Grady was trying to do work in her room, so I didn't even bother asking her for help. And I've always been a man of action, so I acted. I started bashing every Roomba I saw. Metal flew, and plastic parts hit the walls. I'm a Platinum Swing in Little League, which is pretty hard to do. I'm not sure how it works, but I think it means I have the hardest swing even though I have a batting average of .190.

The Scooba was the hardest one to take down. Every time I brought the bat down, it would squirt water and chemicals in my face. Right in my eyeballs. I'm lucky I had a metal bat or I'd have been a goner.

It might have been hours or really 3 and half minutes. I'm not sure, but I defeated all of the Roombas. Well, that's not totally accurate. Mom came in and saw what I was doing. So did Dad. They were both there and it was pretty cool to see them both, but they didn't think it was cool to see me. Mom had saved the little Roomba- the only one to survive my assault. It kept trying to roll up her body, to get away from me. I looked pretty menacing in my long pjs with metal and gunk on me.

I heard a lot of words, that morning. Strong words. Words that make you feel like you've had too much candy corn and your gut wants to burst. I may have cried. I don't remember, so don't ask. But I did try to get away. I ran upstairs and took off my pjs. I didn't want any of the Roomba guts on me. I also didn't appreciate Mom and Dad sticking

up for those things. I yelled out, some of the words I'd just heard. I think Mom and Dad heard them, because they got real quiet.

Grady knocked on my door to see if I was okay. She never knocks. I told her to go away, but I wish I'd let her in.

After that night, Mom kept only the one Roomba. She didn't use it too much, since she wanted to do more cleaning herself. Grady and I would pitch in every so often. It became fun, though how cleaning is fun I don't know. But it was. It is. And that little Roomba pokes its head out and I tell it to go away. It still scares me. Mom and Dad and Grady laugh, but it does.

And that last little Roomba is still active. I can see it even now. I'm in bed and there isn't any light in my room. Under the closed door I can see its shadow, creeping along by the door crack. Waiting for me.

Whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr…