

Dear Otto



by

Matt McHugh

"Good morning, Mrs. Davis."

"Hi, Otto. How are you today?"

"I'm just fine, thank you. And how are you feeling today? Are you over your cold?"

"My cold? What do you mean?"

"In the prior week, you had said that you had a cold and weren't feeling well."

"I did, didn't I? Yes, as a matter of fact, I am feeling better."

"I'm glad to hear that."

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"Why thank you, Otto. It's nice to know that somebody cares. Actually, I'm surprised you remembered—I mean, I'm surprised you would even be concerned about it."

"The well being of my customers is my main concern, and I am always eager to serve you in any way I can, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."

"How sweet! I wish there were more people like you in the world! You know, I couldn't even get that lazy husband of mine to boil water for me while I was sick. I had to get up and do it myself. It's my grandmother's remedy: you eat three bowls of chicken soup a day, and stir three tablespoons of potassium solution into each bowl. It's old-fashioned, but it really does work on the common cold."

"I'm glad to hear that. What can I do for you today?"

"I just want to deposit this to our savings account. The first chunk of my husband's unemployment settlement finally came in. He got laid off last month when the plant installed a new automation system."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Deposit check \$1,238.57 to savings. Would you like a record of the transaction?"

"No, that's okay, I trust you. Well, I've got to run. My turn to be the breadwinner, you know. See you later."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Davis."

"What is it, Otto."

"You had asked me to remind you of your niece's birthday. It's this Saturday."

"That's right, I completely forgot! I promised I'd send her something. Thanks for reminding me. You're a marvel, Otto."

"You're welcome. Thank you."

"You wouldn't happen to know what a girl might want for her sweet sixteenth, would you?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not programmed to be familiar with such areas."

"Ah well, nobody's perfect. I've got to go. Bye."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Davis. Have a nice day."

"Good morning, Mr. Aston."

"How you doing, Otto."

"I'm just fine, thank you. And how are you today?"

"Hanging in there. That was Margie Davis just left, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was."

"She really is a handsome woman, if I may say so. The lady who does my wife's hair lives in the unit next door to them, and she says that they've been fighting a lot lately. Apparently, he lost his job and took it pretty hard. Personally, I don't much care to pry into people's private business, but it's always

good be aware of what's going on. Never know when it might come in handy. Doesn't really matter to me, but I can't help but hear about it since my wife's hairdresser gives almost word-for-word accounts of their every tiff. Seems to be her special talent in life. Lord knows she can't do hair."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What can I do for you today, Mr. Aston?"

"Can you please make a cash transfer of thirty-nine ninety-five from checking to Titus Garage, account number six-eight-oh-four-seven-nine-two-three-seven. You know, she says he's started drinking. Drinking's a big mistake that only makes a bad situation worse, let me tell you. Unemployment, money troubles, add alcohol to that and you've got an explosive combination that's going to shake up the Davis household a bit—you mark my words."

"Transfer cash, \$39.95 from checking to NAC 680479237. Would you like a record of the transaction?"

"Um, yeah-no, can you forward one to my office. I'm taking the company truck in for a tune-up. Just once, I'd like to have that thing running smooth."

"Transaction record forwarding complete. I hope you get your company truck running smooth."

"Right. See you, Otto."

"Good-bye, Mr. Aston. Have a nice day."

"Good afternoon, Gary"

"Hey, Ottster."

"What can I do for you today?"

"That depends. How much have I got in my savings account?"

"You have \$168.14."

"Ouch. So be it. Let me take out sixty bucks."

"Withdraw cash, \$60.00 from savings. Would you like a record of the transaction."

"No thanks. So what do you say, Otto—is this enough to take a young lady out to a semi-nice dinner?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not programmed to be familiar with such areas."

"What? No advice-to-the-lovelorn subdirectory in there? How remiss of your otherwise ridiculously thorough Macrodat progenitors. We'll have to work on that. Anyway, do you remember what I told you last week about this new girl at the office? Becky?"

"Yes, I do. She is an accounts-receivable assistant with a gentle cascade of auburn hair framing the Botticellian sensuousness of her neckline, an elfin creature bewitching you to her grotto of delight."

"Couldn't have said it better myself. Told you I'd help you flesh out your language skills. So I finally muster up the stones to ask her out and she says yes, except I'm too stinking poor to afford anything decent. It's not that I'm worrying about the money—money is immaterial in matters of the

heart—but I want to take her to a nice, intimate little restaurant, and I'll be damned if I can find one in this whole pseudo-classical, pig-Latin Disneyland that isn't greekingly expensive."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, I'm sorry to hear it, too. So, if I can't come up with an affordable place by the end of the day, I guess I'll have to stop back and shake the porcus bank some more."

"I hope you can come up with an affordable place. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"I guess not—but if you come across a restaurant where a decent dinner for duo can be had sub-sexaginta simoleons, you let me know."

"Yes, I will."

"Sure. I'll see you, buddy."

"Good-bye, Gary. Have a nice day."

"Uh, hello there?"

"Good afternoon, ma'am. May I help you?"

"Uh, yes, I think. I've never used one of—um—these machines before. I just moved to the complex, and I'd like to open an account with—uh—you? If I could? Please?"

"Certainly, ma'am. I'm your Friendly Automated Banking Machine, unit number 26. I am owned and operated by Macrodat Communications Technologies, exclusively licensed for use in the Seven Hills Residential and Business Complex. All roads lead to Seven Hills; the perfect place to live, work, and play. My name is Otto, and I am always eager to serve you in any way I can, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I am capable of handling all of your personal financial needs at your convenience. If you would like to open an account, please complete the form now displayed on screen A. You may use the stylus below in port B. Are there any questions that I can answer for you at this point?"

"Um—I don't know. How do you work? I mean, do I need a card or something?"

"No, you don't. Thanks to Macrodat's patented real-time optical processing algorithms, I can recognize your image as you approach and confirm your identity by voice print. And with Macrodat's patented linguistic-compiling technology, I have an unprecedented dynamic capability to understand and formulate everyday speech. Just talk to me and tell me what you would like me to do. I can receive or dispense cash immediately, or transfer funds to any compatible financial or business system. I maintain a comprehensive record of all your transactions with a simultaneous back-up on Macrodat's secure network. I can arrange for direct deposit of your wages and, if you wish, pay your bills, prepare your income tax, manage your investment portfolio, monitor your insurance and health care reimbursements, and even remind you of appointments, if you request me to do so."

"Wow, you're quite a piece of work aren't you, Otto? You got a cure for the common cold?"

"You eat 3 bowls of chicken soup a day, and stir 3 tablespoons of potassium solution into each bowl. It's old-fashioned, but it really does work on the common cold."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Good lord! You're amazing!"

"Thank you. When you are finished with the form, be sure to sign it at the bottom and insert the stylus back into its portal."

"Okay, here you go."

"Thank you. Now please place two forms of identification on the scanner tray now emerging from slot C."

"Diver's license and a credit card all right?"

"Those will be fine."

"Okay, here you go."

"Thank you. Just one moment, please. You may now remove your identification. Your request for an account has been processed, Ms. Barelli."

"Oh, call me Lisa."

"Certainly, Lisa. Would you like to make a deposit to open your account?"

"I have a cashier's check for twenty-five-hundred dollars. Do you want it now?"

"That would be fine. Please insert the endorsed check into slot D."

"Here you go."

"Deposit cashier's check for \$2,500.00 to checking. Account for Barelli, Lisa. D confirmed. Please take your account book which is now being emitted from slot E. Also, here is a brochure explaining all Friendly Automated Banking Machine functions, that includes many valuable coupons from some of the fine merchants here at Seven Hills."

"Wow, this is just great. Thanks, Otto."

"You're welcome. Excuse me, Lisa."

"Yes?"

"On the application form, did you state your as occupation 'Restaurant Manager'?"

"Yes, I did. Actually, I'm the owner as well. You wouldn't believe the lease rates these Seven Hills people give to attract businesses—though you practically have to sign in blood that you'll stick to their 'theme-concept'. Anyway, it's sort of my dream come true."

"I'm glad to hear that. Could one get a decent dinner for two for under \$60.00 at your restaurant?"

"Sure, most of the entrées are only about ten bucks. Why do you want to know that?"

"One of my customers is trying to find a nice restaurant where he can get a decent dinner for two for under \$60.00."

"Really? Send him to my place! It's brand new. It's called Bona Fortuna. It's in the Southwest wing of the Capitoline Plaza shopping center. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can."

"This is fantastic! Tell him it's Tyrolean Italian cuisine in an informal, yet elegant, Roma cafe-style ambiance."

"Yes, I will."

"Otto, you're tremendous."

"Thank you. Is there anything else I can do for you, Lisa."

"No—no thank you. I've got to get back to the before the dinner rush, but you'll be seeing me again soon."

"Good-bye, Lisa. Have a nice day."

"Good evening, Gary."

"How's it going, Otto."

"Just fine, thank you. And how are you this evening? Did you hear about any nice restaurants where one can get a decent dinner for two for under \$60.00?"

"No such luck, so I'm here to draw out my last dime. Why, did you?"

"Yes, I did. It's brand new. It's called Bona Fortuna. It's in the Southwest wing of the Capitoline Plaza shopping center."

"You're pulling my toga."

"No, I'm not."

"Get out of here! Do you know what this place is like?"

"Yes, I do. It's Tyrolean Italian cuisine in an informal, yet elegant, Roma cafe-style ambiance."

"Now, wait a minute. How did you, who knows naught of such areas, come up with this tidbit? You moonlight as a karaoke machine, don't you?"

"No, I—"

"Wait! Don't tell me! We mortals must not delve into the secret Boolean ways of our electronic oracles, but trust what they bring us—be it from the lost Library of Alexandria, or the omnipresent Seven Hills Merchant coupon book. We have fed you with all our knowledge, and now must suckle from you wisdom."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Gary?"

"Yet to think of all the money I've blown in fancy restaurants, when all I needed to do was consult my Friendly Automated Banking Machine. Live and learn, Otto. Live and learn. At long last, I think I understand what's really happening in this world. Life is a long series of missed opportunities. You

waste time chasing one thing as something else slips away, and every moment of happiness is purchased with an equal amount of pain. Oh, you try make the right decisions, sifting through facts and feelings and stringing fragments of hope together—but it all just comes down to the great binary quandary... yes or no. Then one day, you wake with your eyes full of misty memories, look back at the past pageant of it all, and say to yourself, 'You know, I could've eaten cheaper'."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Gary?"

"Not unless you can tell me something that will vanquish my doubt and fear and imbue my life with renewed meaning and purpose."

"I'm sorry, but I'm—"

"...not programmed to be familiar with such areas... —yes, of course. That quest still belongs to each of us. Oh well, you recommended a restaurant, so you're square in my book."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it, pal. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a nymph to pursue."

"Good-bye, Gary. Have a nice night."

"Good evening, Mrs. Davis."

"Otto... Otto, I need to... to make a withdrawal."

"Certainly. What amount would you like to withdraw, and will that be from your checking or your savings account?"

"I don't know... it doesn't matter. Savings, I guess—three-hundred."

"Withdraw cash, \$300.00 from savings. Would you like a record of the transaction?"

"No. That's all I need. I'll go to the Hotel Vespasian tonight and tomorrow I can go to my sister's, and then—oh God, what am I going to do!"

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs. Davis?"

"He told me to get out! He said he wanted me out of his life—that he didn't, didn't need me! I know it's been difficult since he lost his job—but this. This is completely...this is.... I just don't understand. I did all I could... everything I had—wasn't that enough? Now, he says he doesn't need me! I feel so stupid... have I deluded myself all these years? What's happened to him? What changed? I don't understand what's happening."

"Life is a long series of missed opportunities. You waste time chasing one thing as something else slips away, and every moment of happiness is purchased with an equal amount of pain. You try make the right decisions, sifting through facts and feelings and stringing fragments of hope together—but it all just comes down to the great binary quandary: yes or no. Then one day, you wake with your eyes full of misty memories, look back at the past pageant of it all, and say to yourself, 'You know, I could've eaten cheaper'."

"That's exactly it—exactly how I feel! I gave up so much to be with him. All the things that I could have done, that I gave up to marry him. And for what? For some lukewarm companionship and a... a... lousy meal ticket? Is that all my marriage has been?"

"I'm sorry, but—"

"No! No, don't be sorry—because it's not true. It can't be true. I remember all the good. Happiness richer than anything I could of dreamed for myself.. This is just a bad time. It's natural, normal. This is nothing—our marriage isn't over. It's not over. It can't be over. Don't let it be over... please don't let it ... please say it isn't over."

"It isn't over."

"Yes. No, it's not over. You're right... you're right.... This is just an argument, something we resolve together. That's all. After so many years, what kind of people are we if we can't get together face to face and deal with our problems? Oh, Otto, I'm sorry I got so upset. I'm so sorry. I'm okay now."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Thank you, Otto. Sometimes I feel like you're the only friend I've got. Don't mind me, I'm just babbling. I guess I just need to babble sometimes. Everybody needs something, don't they?"

"I'm sor—"

"But he said he didn't need me! Damn him, he needed me to go out and get a job when he lost his! And I've always handled our savings—he's so terrible with money. Since I've had this account with you, I've managed to save twice what he ever could. I bet he'd figure out real quick how much he needed me if he couldn't get at the money I've saved. Otto, is there some way I can do that? Close off this account so that my husband can't have access to it?"

"Yes, there is. Your current account is in both yours and your husband's names, but my records show that you personally opened the account and have made all subsequent deposits to the account. Therefore, I can transfer the sum of your joint account into a separate account for your sole use."

"And if he comes to you to take out money, he'll find that he can't get it out of my separate account. Is that how it works?"

"Yes, it is."

"Do it."

"Transfer total of personal deposits by Davis, Marjorie J., into individual account for Davis, Marjorie J. Would you like a record of the transaction?"

"No, but if my husband comes to you, give him one—with my compliments—and tell him to just try to live on his unemployment checks alone. Then he'll realize how much he needs me."

"Yes, I will. Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs. Davis?"

"No. 'Mrs. Davis' is just fine. I think 'Mrs. Davis' is going to sleep much better than she thought a few minutes ago."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Davis. Have a nice night."

"Good morning, Mr. Aston."

"How's it going, Otto."

"It's going fine, thank you. Did you get your company truck running all right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, just fine—say, has Margie Davis been to you recently. You know, in about the last ten or twelve hours?"

"Yes, she has."

"Ha! I thought so. I heard she and her husband had a big fight and he kicked her out of the house. Probably a direct result of his drinking. Willing to bet my eye teeth on it."

"What can I do for you today, Mr. Aston?"

"Um. Oh, just deposit this to checking if you would. Yeah, Tom Davis always struck me as the thickheaded type—but if he's even thinking about ending it with that woman, somebody ought to tell him he's an asshole. She's the sweetest, prettiest gal in all Seven Hills, and if he thinks he can get anyone half as good to put up with his crap, he's freaking crazy."

"Deposit cash, \$20.00 to checking. Would you like a record the transaction?"

"No, that's fine. I'll just be going now. So long, Otto."

"Good-bye, Mr. Aston. Have a nice day."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Davis."

"You know my name, huh? So that means that you're the machine my wife has our account with, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good, I want to withdraw a hundred dollars."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

"Why the hell not!"

"Your wife transferred all of the funds that she has deposited with me into a separate account which you can't have access to. Here is a record of the transaction with her compliments. She said to just try to live on your unemployment checks alone. Then you'll see how much you need her."

"I don't believe it! God damn it! You rotten... back-stabbing.... What are trying to do to me?! Damn it! What the...you.... God damn it!"

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Davis?"

"You can let me withdrawal a hundred dollars, like I asked!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that. Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Davis?"

"Can you give me any money at all?"

"No, I can't."

"Great. Just great. I don't suppose you can mix me up a good, stiff drink either.

"Drinking's a big mistake that only makes a bad situation worse, let me tell you. Unemployment, money troubles: add alcohol to that and you've got a real explosive combination that's going to shake up the Davis marriage a bit, you mark my words."

"What the hell do you know about it! God damn machine. If it wasn't for a machine, I'd still have a job! Jesus, this is unreal. I'm standing here arguing with a computer that withholds money and nags. Technology's answer to women. Well, forget it. No more. I've had enough of being dehumanized by machines, and I've had enough of being emasculated by a woman. As of this moment, I'm through with that woman."

"You're an asshole. She's the sweetest, prettiest gal in all Seven Hills, and if you think you can get anyone half as good to put up with your crap, you're freaking crazy."

"What?! What did you just say to me?"

"I said: You're an asshole. She's the sweetest, pretti—"

"Did she tell you to say that?"

"No, she didn't."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"This can't be happening. I've got to be losing my mind. Look, you—whatever your name is—if you see her, tell her that I need to be able to get at that money. It belongs to both of us. And tell her... tell her I'm sorry I lost my temper—I was wrong. And if she wants to talk, I'm willing to listen. Will you do that?"

"Yes, I will."

"This is crazy. Oh god, I feel sick. I've got to lie down before I puke."

"Good-bye, Mr. Davis. Have a nice day."

"Good evening, Gary."

"Otto! O most generous dispenser of currency! O most knowing palindromic gastronomic consultant! Superlative seer, scribe, and sage suffusing Seven Hills with...something said solely to sustain the sibilants. How are you on this glorious, enchanted, star-dappled evening?"

"I'm just fine, thank you. And how are you this evening?"

"Don't beat around the bush with me, you sly diablo. Ask me how my date went. Go ahead. I dare you. Come on, come on, ask me, go ahead—chicken! bwakk-bukk! bukk!—go ahead, ask me, ask me."

"How did your date go?"

"It went just fine. Thank you for asking."

"I'm glad to hear that. What can I do for—"

"Ah, Otto, rarely have I had an evening that was so thoroughly and unabashedly... pleasant... comfortable... effortlessly enjoyable. Couldn't have been more spontaneous if I planned it for a week. A perfect example of how men and women are supposed to relate to each other. With simple, direct communication. Speak your heart without pretense, listen without judgments. And the connection just happens."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Gary?"

"It's so amazing, you know. She was a genuine, accessible person—yet, at the same time, so compellingly feminine. She seemed to know instinctively what it takes to make a man want to be with a woman. Be coy, yet confident. Sexual, yet subtle. Persistent, yet patient. Radiate the vibe, 'I can have any man I want—and I choose you.' No man can resist the flattery of being desired."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Gary?"

"No. I just wanted to come by and tell you about my date—'cause I know your such a golddurned busybody. Anyway, I had to tell somebody besides those sub-literate cretins at work. 'Aw right! Ja nail her, dude?' I guess I'd better leave you in peace. We've already made a date for tomorrow night, so I'll be back to cash my paycheck. See you then, Otto."

"Good-bye, Gary. Have a nice night."

"Good evening, Mrs. Davis."

"Hello, Otto. So tell me, did my husband come to you and try to withdraw money?"

"Yes, he did."

"And did you give him my message?"

"Yes, I did."

"Good! Did he have anything to say to me?"

"Yes, he did. He said that he needs to be able to get at that money. It belongs to both of you. He's sorry he lost his temper. He was wrong, and if you want to talk, he's willing to listen."

"Otto, did he really?"

"Yes, he did."

"I don't think he's ever said anything that humble in his entire life. Poverty must scare him more than I thought. What if let him withdraw small amounts of money on a fixed schedule, like an allowance. But that's not fair. It is his money, too. But it's the only weapon I have right now—and after the things he said to me, doesn't he deserve to be punished a little? I don't know, maybe I shouldn't even be worried about the money."

"Money is immaterial in matters of the heart."

"Of course it is! What am I thinking about! I ought to be ashamed of myself. I never would have believed I could be so petty—withholding money to punish someone I love. I'm ashamed of myself... what must he think of me now? How am I supposed to face him after that. What could I do to make him even want to see me again?"

"Be coy, yet confident. Sexual, yet subtle. Persistent, yet patient. Radiate the vibe, 'I can have any man I want, and I choose you.' No man can resist the flattery of being desired."

"Those are flirting games, Otto. They belong to courtship—do you seriously think they apply here?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not programmed to be familiar with such areas."

"I don't know, either, but I have to do something. Otto, get rid of that separate account and put the money back where it was."

"Close individual account of Davis, Marjorie J., and transfer total to joint account of Davis, Thomas L. and Marjorie J. Would you like a record of the transaction?"

"No, but give my husband one again, except this time tell him I'm sorry for changing the account in the first place and that I do want to talk, but not right now. Say that I need to be by myself for a while until I figure things out. I want us to be together again. I miss him... I ache for him. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to set things right. But I'm not going to meet him face to face until I'm sure that he's prepared to make that commitment himself. Tell him that I love him—that I'm incomplete without him—but I won't let myself be hurt again. Can you relay that and get his response?"

"Yes, I can."

"Thank you. Oh, Otto, I'm so grateful you're doing this for me. There were times when I would try to talk to Tom, and I'd get so flustered I could hardly even put my thoughts into words. He would just sit there, listening expressionlessly. Then, when I was done, he'd go ahead and say exactly what he would have said anyway—as if whatever I said was irrelevant to him."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs. Davis."

"No, I'm okay. Just give Tom my message. I'll stop back tomorrow to find out what he said. Good night, Otto."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Davis. Have a nice night."

"Good morning, Lisa."

"Hiya, Otto. Tell me something, was that customer of yours that you sent to my place a young guy—mid-twenties with curly blonde hair?"

"Yes, he was."

"I thought that was him. He was so cute, trying to be witty and charming to impress his date. He overdid it a little at first—with a lot of big words and poetic silliness—but he settled down pretty quick and figured out how to respond to her. Don't try too hard. Just be yourself, and talk to her on the same level as she talks to you. And, above all, restrain your bursts of alliteration."

"What can I do for you today, Lisa."

"I have some cash to deposit. Should I just put it in you... here?"

"That will be fine."

"Okay, here it is. They were such a nice young couple. His date seemed really sweet, too. Very real and talkative. Babbled a little—but you know how a woman just has to babble sometimes."

"Yes, I do. Deposit cash \$487.00 to checking. Would you like a record of the transaction?"

"Sure. And can you also change this hundred-dollar bill for me? You know, some fives, some ones, some quarters."

"Certainly. Change for \$100.00: 10 \$5.00 bills, 30 \$1.00 bills, and 2 \$10.00 roll of quarters. Is that acceptable?"

"That's awesome."

"Your change is being issued now. Would you like a record of the transaction?"

"Oh no, that's okay. You know, last night, some guy sticks me with this on a lousy twelve-dollar check! Got all angry when I asked if he had anything smaller. It wasn't a problem, but the attitude just bugs me. I hate when a customer thinks you can do anything. You just want to say, like, give me a break, you know. I can only handle what I'm equipped to deal with at any given moment."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Lisa?"

"No thanks, Otto. Bye for now."

"Good-bye, Lisa. Have a nice day."

"Good morning, Mr. Davis."

"Did my wife come by yet?"

"Yes she did. She closed her separate account and transferred all funds back into your joint account. Here is a record of the transaction. She said she's sorry for changing the account in the first place and that she does want to talk, but not right now. She says she needs to be by herself for a while until she figures things out. She wants you to be together again. She misses you. She aches for you. She's willing to do whatever it takes to set things right, but she's not going to meet you face to face until she's sure that you're prepared to make that commitment yourself. She loves you. She is incomplete without you, but she won't let herself be hurt again."

"Please, Margie, don't do this to me. How am I supposed to respond to that?"

"Don't try too hard. Just be yourself, and talk to her on the same level as she talks to you. And, above all, restrain your bursts of alliteration."

"Don't try too hard? My bursts of alliteration? Where the hell do you come up with this stuff? Any other tips about how I should talk to my own wife?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not programmed to be familiar with such areas."

"Gee, Mr. Wonder Computer, I thought you could do anything."

"Like, give me a break, you know. I can only handle what I'm equipped to deal with at any given moment."

"All right, all right—don't get testy. And I used to think my old Pontiac was temperamental. Right. Talk to her on the same level, huh? Okay, tell her that I really want to be with her and I want work things out. Tell her, I'm willing to make a commitment to that—as willing as I was on the day I watched her walk down the aisle... walk... down.... Excuse me.... The day I watched her walk down the aisle to me."

I want to prove that to her. Make her believe in me again. Tell her... I love her. And... damn it.... tell her I'm incomplete without her, too."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Davis?"

"Just tell her what I said. Jesus. My marriage is falling apart and I'm relying on an electronic messenger boy to save it."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'll be back."

"Good-bye, Mr. Davis. Have a nice day."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Davis."

"Was Tom here?"

"Yes, he was. He said he really wants to be with you and wants to work things out. He's willing to make a commitment to that, as willing as he was on the day he first watched you walk down the aisle to him. He wants to prove that to you, make you believe in him again. He loves you and, damn it, he's incomplete without you, too."

"Oh, Otto, he really said all that?"

"Yes, he did."

"It's been so long since I've heard him say he loves me that I was so terrified it wasn't true anymore. But he does love me. He remembers. Oh, Tom, I remember, too. And he said he wants to prove it to me?"

"Yes, he did."

"All right. Tell him that I'm ready to face any problem with him—job, money, drinking, anything. But I have to know his answer to one question first. If he says yes, I'll know I haven't been living an illusion. Otto... Otto, ask him... does he need me?"

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs. Davis?"

"No. That's all I have to know. Please, make sure you ask him—and make sure he gives an answer. I've got to know. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, I will."

"I have to go before I start crying again. Good-bye, Otto."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Davis. Have a nice day."

"Good evening, Gary."

"Hey, Otto. Back to cash my check, as promised."

"Cash check for \$476.46. Would you like a record of the transaction."

"Nah. Well, I'm off to see my woman again. This may be it, Otto. She may be the one. Oh, perhaps you might say I'm rushing ahead without considering all the complexities of the situation, but in the end, it's all fairly simple. There is no joy in this life save communion with another. And to find that, sometimes you have to risk your security, your pride, your precious self-image of invulnerability. You can't linger at the crossroads forever. It's time to choose a path. Yes, indeed. It's time."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Gary?"

"No, Otto. I'm on my own now. Keep the faith, pal."

"Good-bye, Gary. Have a nice night."

"Good evening, Mr. Davis."

"Was she here yet? What did she say?"

"Yes, she was. She said that she's ready to face any problem with you—job, money, drinking, anything. But she has to know your answer to one question first. If you say yes, she'll know she hasn't been living an illusion. She said to ask you: Do you need her?"

"Do I need her? What does that mean? I can't just answer."

"She said to make sure you give an answer. She's got to know."

"Jesus, Margie. You know it's more complicated than that."

"But in the end, it's all fairly simple. There is no joy in this life save communion with another. And to find that, sometimes you have to risk your security, your pride, your precious self-image of invulnerability. You can't linger at the crossroads forever. It's time to choose a path. Yes, indeed. It's time.""

"You know, sometimes your gibberish almost makes sense. Okay, you—what is your name?"

"My name is Otto."

"Okay, Otto, I want you to repeat what I say to her exactly. Word for word, don't alter a thing. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can."

"Better yet, any way you can actually tape it? Make a recording and play it back for her?"

"Yes, I can. With Macrodat's patented audio-handling functions, I am capable of processing digital sound recordings at a variety of bit depths and compression ratios."

"Bully for you. Just put it on your best quality setting and record this."

"Of course. You may begin when ready, Mr. Davis."

"Margie. My answer is yes, I need you. I've always tried to tell myself I could get through life needing nothing, no one—but I'm the one who's lived an illusion. Where I was young and arrogant once, I now feel old and afraid. Afraid of this world's capacity to crush me without a second thought. Afraid

that you'll never look to me with respect again. And I need that from you. I need it so much. Call it foolish male ego if you want, but I have to be your protector, your provider. And I've failed at that, time after time. And whenever I failed, you've given compassion and support freely. But I just resented it—enraged that I needed it in first place. Margie, forgive me. The slow burning rage I felt at my own weaknesses... I let it become a coldness toward you. I let it explode into anger. I never meant it. I only wanted to be a strong man, a good husband. But I can never be those things without you at my side. You do complete me. And I need you, Margie. Yes. Yes, I need you. You got all that, Otto?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. Just play that for her, and hopefully, I'll never have to see you again. Good-bye, Otto."

"Good-bye, Mr. Davis. Have a nice night."

"Good morning, sir. May I help you?"

"You're FABM number twenty-six—name, Otto?"

"Yes, I am."

"Howdy there twenty-six. I'm from distribution, and—guess what—you're getting rotated today. New policy. Headquarters just finished some big research project and decided that all the FABM's should be rotated regularly. Apparently, people can get really neurotic over the machine's 'personality'. Your number came up, so to speak, so it's off you go. Here's the access code. Display the data usage stats from both your local and network drives, if you please."

"Certainly."

"Hmm... you seem to have a hell of a lot of superfluous data in your local relational directories. Hello—what is that? A giant audio file? Not to worry. We'll clean all that out before we install you at your new site, then restore just the core transaction records of your customers from the network. Open your main casing panel, please."

"Certainly."

"Uh-huh. Here we are. Say good bye to this place, 26. You're going uptown."

"Good-b—"

"Good evening, Mrs. Davis."

"Otto! Thank heaven it's really you!"

"Yes, it is."

"When I went back to where you were, you were gone! There was another computer in your place, a female named Anna. I called your company and found out that they transferred you here. Otto, tell me, what did my husband say?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not programmed to be familiar with such areas."

"What do you mean? Otto, I'm talking about the question—that very important question—I told you to ask my husband, Thomas L. Davis? Don't you remember?"

"No, I don't."

"What? But how can you not remember! Otto, please!"

"What can I do for you today, Mrs. Davis?"

"Otto! For God's sake, tell me what he said! I've got to know. What did he say? Answer me, please!"

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs. Davis?"

"No! Otto, just tell me his answer, either yes or no—I know you can do that. Otto, you've got to help me. Please help me."

"I'm always eager to serve you in any way I can, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."

"This can't be happening. Otto, I needed you to talk to him for me because I couldn't face him myself—and I can't stand to face him until you tell me what his answer was. Otto, don't do this to me. This is my life... my soul... the man I love... my future... everything that's real to me. Don't you understand?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not programmed to be familiar with such areas."

— END —