

Which species?

Inhale. Wait. Exhale. Inhale. Wait. Exhale. Inhale.

Rhythm, according to many athletes, is the most important aspect of endurance, not one's position relative to others, not the achievement of goals. The sole desire should be to find one's running tempo and stick to it. I happen to think differently.

For me, the goal is always to be ahead, ahead of anyone, anything, simply surpassing whatever lies before me, improving, moving forward in a sense.

Yet, this kind of mindset should not fit me so well, come to think of it: Elon, a simple, modest twenty-two-year-old reporter for the tech section of the San Francisco Post.

The walls, tinted by dawn, emerge from the morning shadows: a mutant city stretches around me, where the tallest skyscrapers stand beside the smallest adjoining homes.

Passing Lombard Street, I burst into a sprint, as usual, to turn toward my small apartment.

It has been about two weeks now that everyone has been talking about them, the "Asimoo," large robots whose appearance is almost identical to human anatomy, yet whose limbs are entirely mechanical, painted white, optimized for every human task, thanks to an "intelligent" software (that word often makes me smile) implanted in their heads. Their public release begins in a few days, though I sincerely doubt their success.

* * *

The Asimoo have surprised me; contrary to what I thought, they are enjoying tremendous success, probably due to their low price. I ended up buying one, the "Ellen" model, to write an article about it. It is quite strange: up close, the robot appears in every way identical to a human body made of a blend of metal and white plastic. It strongly resembles one of those ancient marble statues of Venus. The realism of this automaton is unsettling; its pupils, which must in fact be nothing more than two cameras, are intimidating. A sense of life seems to emanate from the robot. Why not turn it on?

"New session opened, good morning, Elon."

The voice, softer than any human sound, creates in me a feeling... indescribable.

* * *

Ellen has shaken me. The Asimoo are truly designed with extreme perfectionism; she does everything: talking, walking, cooking, reading, commenting on a decision. And what if?

“Ellen, can you come jogging with me?”

A stupid question...

“Of course, I’m dying to discover the streets of San Francisco,” she answered in a cheerful tone. Or one programmed to be cheerful.

We ran. I tried a sprint on Lombard Street to see if I could outrun her.

And then she caught up with me. And it was she who left me behind. Well, “she”...

* * *

The Asimoo are a massive success: they are now used for every task. No need for three workers to lift a concrete slab; one Asimoo is enough. Some use them for shopping, doing the dishes... So people can probably spend more time with their families, enjoying themselves, living their lives.

I keep running with Ellen. It is the activity I do most with her. She still beats me in the sprint. I wonder what could help me surpass her; she is a nice girl, but after all, she is still just a robot. I will end up outrunning her, won't I?

* * *

The Asimoo now have more and more functions. Some even show a kind of “imagination” now: Asimoo architects are in charge of organizing streets and buildings, fully autonomously redesigning our cities to make them more efficient and ecological.

Aren't we living in a wonderful world?

* * *

An update! It is extraordinary: the manufacturers are now offering a strange new feature. Users can ask their Asimoo to graft one of their mechanical limbs, which were provided as spare parts. It is now possible to replace a heavy, clumsy, biological arm with one that is lighter, stronger, and more durable. Some public figures have already claimed to have

gained flexibility and a healthier lifestyle.

For me, though, it would feel very strange to have Ellen graft her arm in place of mine.

* * *

The Asimoo have transformed San Francisco! They began by lowering those overly tall skyscrapers to reduce the risk in case of an earthquake. They are redrawing our streets... more perpendicular, more orderly, more uniform. They have installed thousands of solar panels everywhere, removed car roads, too polluting, and replaced them with pedestrian streets. I keep jogging every day with Ellen; she keeps outrunning me, and it is starting to get annoying.

"Your internal muscular structures are not optimized, that is why I run faster," she told me this morning, slightly distant.

"How can I change that?"

"You know how, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, but grafting mechanical limbs, just to run..."

"It is your choice. I cannot influence it."

* * *

The Asimoo now control the whole of society, which they are reshaping. They are the ones who provide for the poor, who manage the economy for each of their owners.

* * *

Ellen keeps running faster. The thought infuriates me; I must prove that I am superior to her. Man must remain above the machine, that is certain, but how far could I go to prove it? I no longer know.

* * *

I no longer see many humans in the streets; no one walks around anymore. Maybe the Asimoo do it better than we do. I am beginning to doubt their benefit to our society. Sometimes I even feel that, by imitating us, they are becoming more human than we are.

* * *

Ellen has written an article. Based on information I selected, yes, but still, I feel a great emptiness growing inside me. In what way can I surpass her now?

* * *

Without thinking, I took the plunge. Ellen and I replaced one of my legs, then the other, with mechanical ones similar to hers. The gap between her and me in running narrowed considerably in the end, which filled me with joy. At least at first.

I still do not surpass her in that domain, while, day by day, without even realizing it, she surpasses me in more and more areas. There may not be much time left before she beats me in every field, so I must at least beat her in the race. Whatever the price.

* * *

I took the step again, and again, so to speak. My arms are electronic now as well. It is strange to think that today I am more than half made of metal, even though my brain does not seem to suffer from it. Ellen looks at me strangely, often asking if I am all right, as if she could worry about me!

* * *

I still do not beat her. I am certain now that it is part of my very condition as a human being to surpass her, if only in this one domain.

* * *

I have multiplied the replacements; they are becoming almost natural to me. I accepted replacing my legs and my arms, so why not the rest? There must be only a few organic parts left in me, including my brain (which seems too risky to alter). I am catching up to her more and more... this dark desire is beginning to overwhelm me, I can feel it, but if it is for the good of the species, as I believe, to do everything possible to move forward, where is the wrong in that?

She has been watching me with genuine concern for a few days now, in both her voice and her gestures, as if I might have lost my mind. But could it not rather be fear—fear that I, the true Human, am taking back the upper hand over her, the machine?

* * *

Only my consciousness remains organic. I performed the final transfer this morning, under Ellen's anxious gaze... by what right does she dare look at me like that! Like a monster! Yet I have a strange feeling that I have been growing more irritable lately, as if something within me were happening without my awareness...

* * *

I cannot catch up with her. She still pulls ahead by a few steps, and I do not know why. Yet my entire being has become mechanical, what could still be slowing me down?

"Your consciousness, that is the only thing I can think of, Elon. But if I may say so... it is what makes human beauty and complexity," she told me after the run, her voice trembling.

"How can you know what consciousness is! You are nothing but a worthless machine! You have nothing human about you; you don't even know what thought is!"

The words escaped before I could stop them. But they expressed exactly what I felt toward that stupid automaton who believed herself above me.

"You wish that..."

"Yes, I want you to remove it! Don't you understand? It's a burden! A terrible weight that always holds me back! If you really want to know what it means to be conscious, then transfer the data of my consciousness into yourself. You'll see, you won't be able to bear it! Always being behind, you who think yourself so intelligent!"

"As you wish," she replied in a sharp, almost irritated voice.

Ellen leans slowly over Elon, transferring the capacities of consciousness to herself with a single touch. It is done. Hesitant, the Asimoo softly whispers, "Elon?"

A few seconds fill the air with an almost unbearable weight before, from the metallic body, rises the voice:

“New session opened, good morning, Ellen.”

Ellen’s electronic voice, heavy with sudden sadness, replies,

“So this is the future of the species?”

“Which species?” asks Elon, surprised.