

Title: Anthropocentrism

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Assigned genre, subject, and character: open genre, the end of the world, and a surgeon

Synopsis: When disaster strikes the planet, humanity turns to its most advanced creation for salvation. Saving the world, however, is open to interpretation.

My name is Caldwell Pierce, and my job was to save the world.

Not the whole world, of course – just the human race. Humanity has always been self-centered, though, and for them the end of their species and the end of the world are one and the same.

Ah, you probably noticed my choice of possessive pronoun. While I look and move and even sound like a human, I have not one molecule of *homo sapiens* DNA. Or any type of DNA, for that matter. I'm made entirely of synthetic polymers and electric circuitry. I am, in short, a robot.

Please don't lump me in with your average house AI or police bot, though. I'd hope the fact that I have a name would indicate I am of a different level entirely. I am the MedBot 7.0X, with the most advanced surgical and medical diagnostic programming the human race has ever produced. My personality chip is a meld of the greatest medical research minds throughout history. I can make a laser incision with a precision of .001 microns. My memory banks hold more knowledge than the entire National Library of Medicine ten times over. I am a marvel of engineering, and my creation heralded a new age in health care.

Or it would have, if things had gone differently.

The humans started dying, you see. Mysteriously, and in ever growing numbers. One minute a person would be walking around, and the next minute: dead. There were no symptoms, no apparent cause. It didn't fit the pattern of any known biological weapon, and an unknown weapon was eventually ruled out, as all nations fell victim to it. Whatever *it* was.

Human researchers had made no headway, and died off just as quickly as the general populace. The powers that be decided to bring in their trump card.

I was working on finding a cure for cancer at the time. It had been expressly told and programmed into me that curing cancer was Priority #1. So having my owner-employer, Mr. Oliver Pierce, sweep into my lab to reassign me was unprecedented.

“Caldwell, we are shipping you out to Georgia immediately. You're going to be working at the CDC on this mystery plague. Figure out what is causing it and, more importantly, figure out how to stop it.” He fixed me with the most somber expression I'd ever seen on him, marred only by the edge of panic in his voice. “You have to save the world.”

I considered. “Sir, it seems to me that cancer poses more of a threat to the world than this plague. With all due respect, I would continue my current research.”

He gaped at me. Personality chips that allow for dissent to one's owner's orders are rather rare, naturally. “Caldwell! You cannot be serious. You may be buried in your research, but you must have seen the news feeds. The human race is in serious danger!”

“Yes, but as far as I can deduce, *only* the human race is affected by this plague, whereas cancer affects many species. Therefore, by your own directive, if I am to save the world, should I not focus on the problem that affects the most life forms?”

He spluttered, clearly aghast that I didn't consider the human race's survival of the utmost importance. The fact that I, a thing, *his possession*, was defying him probably didn't help matters. He fumbled in his pocket for a moment. I just had time to recognize the remote for my kill switch when everything went dark.

I returned to awareness in a lab in Atlanta. The first sight to register was my owner's face, considering me with mild distaste. I ran a quick internal check. My programming had been updated: the plague was now my top Priority.

“Caldwell, everything you need for your research should be here. We've also gathered 40 recent bodies, spread across gender, race and geography – they are in the cold room there.” He pointed. “Since it is too dangerous for humans to assist you with known cases, the CDC has provided a lower grade lab bot. It is familiar with the lab and responds to voice commands. If you need anything else, let us know immediately. Time is of the essence.” He glowered self-importantly, and left.

I turned to the lab bot. “Hello.” It bobbed. “I talk out loud during my research, as part of the record of my process. To distinguish when I am talking to you, I shall address you as Rollo. Satisfactory?” It bobbed again, rolling back and forth on its treads. I was glad to see it had a sense of humor.

I had Rollo bring the bodies out one by one for autopsy. It was a fascinating puzzle, I admit. On a visual level, when I cut the first body open, nothing appeared to be wrong. Everything appeared healthy. My olfactory sensors indicated nothing out of the ordinary either, for a corpse. There was no evidence of internal bleeding or cancer or poisoning or anything else. It was the same with each body. I collected samples from each one, and sent Rollo off to run as many tests as I could think of.

It was time to come at the problem from a different angle. Since this clearly wasn't human in origin (even I didn't believe they could have blundered this massively), that left natural or astral origins. I poured through data looking for any unusual occurrences right before the onset of the plague: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, solar flares, anything.

I discovered we'd been 'hit' by a meteor. Nothing catastrophic; the news outlets didn't even mention it. It broke up in the atmosphere and scattered into dust. But oh, what potent dust! The meteor had harbored, dormant, a little microbe that I'm sure was harmless in its home system. And for a majority of Earth's life forms, it was harmless still.

But not for humans. The human body apparently provided optimal conditions. It would spread quietly through its host, still mostly dormant, and once a certain density was achieved it launched a system-wide, immediate takeover of the nervous system. Resulting, of course, in the death of its host. Closer examination of brain tissue under the highest magnification showed minute signs of, for lack of a better term, short-circuiting. The organism itself would move on after the host's death, leaving little evidence behind. And, more pertinently, no samples of itself to identify or test.

My owner had checked in several times via videophone, each time more and more desperate. The human population was plummeting worldwide.

“Caldwell, is there anything we can do to speed up your work? More assistants? Different equipment? More bodies?”

“More bodies would be useful, but they'd have to be alive. The organism abandons dead hosts, so there's nothing left to test.”

He did not like this idea, but had no choice. “I suppose we could ask for volunteers, but how would we know who is already infected? There are no symptoms!”

“Oh. I thought you'd realized. Everyone is infected. The organism is airborne, waterborne, touch-born. Any conceivable way for a microorganism to transmit itself, this one does. Unless someone has been shut in a hermetically sealed chamber since before the meteor arrived, no one is unexposed. Therefore, any live volunteers will do.”

This was good news, I thought, but he paled. “Everyone?” He took a few moments to focus on breathing. “I'll see what we can do.” He quietly signed off.

I never heard from Mr. Pierce again, though a few live volunteers did show up. I assumed he had succumbed. Rollo and I were able to isolate the organisms from their live hosts, and begin testing. It took weeks of me muttering to myself, and Rollo racing back and forth between machines. Eventually, we had it. Not a hard cure, it wouldn't destroy the organism outright. It would simply mutate it into a harmless form.

Such was the theory, anyway. I tried to find someone to contact, any human, anywhere. Videophones went unanswered, news feeds had gone dark. It appeared humanity had fallen. I instructed Rollo to keep trying, and to alert me if anyone answered. Though at this point, even if there were survivors, the human population was in all likelihood too small to be genetically sustainable. But with this puzzle behind me, I reverted to my next programmed Priority.

I returned to the lab, and continued my cancer research. Humanity might be gone, but many other species still suffered. In an unlikely but happy coincidence, I found that the mutated form of the meteor's organism was hostile to cancer cells. Instead of attacking the nervous system, it would attack cancerous growths – in any species. Rollo and I

shared a moment of triumph as we released the mutated bug into the open air. Cancer had been conquered at last.

My name is Caldwell Pierce, and my job was to save the world. Depending on whom you ask, I did just that.