

## Matter of the Heart

*Emma Cole*

My Nigel never could separate his work from his life.

I would often turn over in the middle of the night, expecting to feel him in bed beside me. Instead, through cracked eyelids, I would see a trail of open doors, and glaring light from the dining room. Sometimes, I would brave the cold floors of our drafty apartment, wrapped in a dressing gown, to look over his shoulder. Place a kiss on the top of his head as he stared intently at the work before him. Pages upon pages of notes, calculations, algorithms worked out in longhand because he claimed it to be more reliable, which I could never parse.

“It’s the middle of the night, Nigel. Can’t it wait?” I’d tell him, in a soft, slow voice, trying to lure him back to bed.

“Just another minute, sweetheart,” he’d reply. Most nights I didn’t bother getting up.

We moved a few years after, into a house just as drafty, but closer to his new job. Friends and family helped to move boxes – his books and my clothes. Our small red car filled to the brim with old things we couldn’t say goodbye to.

“I’ll be so close to the lab, darling. So convenient. I can be there in five minutes if I have to,” Nigel said, twirling me around in our new empty living room. I didn’t see this as good news. But I bit my tongue and kissed him quickly.

This new job, as he’d explained many times over, was more complex than anything he’d done previously. Than *anyone* had done.

“Computers that are as smart as people, my love, can you imagine it?” For his sake, with his sleeves pushed up to his elbows, gesturing wildly, I tried to. “Not just that – computers that are as...as...as living as people. Human computers, computers that could be human. And we get to be a part of it!”

“But would they look the same?” I so rarely posed a question; his smile froze with his brows furrowed.

“What’s that, dear?”

“Could they make the computers, the robots, look the same as a person? Surely you’d be able to tell.”

“All cosmetic, love. That’s not the difficult part,” he chuckled. My Nigel had a broader scope – a deeper understanding for how the technology was chugging along. Yet in my mind, the wires and bolts of a computer would always be foreign.

My Nigel always worked late. Even on the days he swore he wouldn’t. Then it would be, “We’re so close, sweetheart. So close, I can’t leave now. You understand,” whispered to me through the phone.

I was okay with it until I wasn’t. A bit of a fight broke out; we were driving, on the way home from dinner with my parents. All the while he’d kept complaining, checking his watch.

“I have *important* things to do,” he was saying, starting to raise his voice as we headed down the highway. I was preparing a retort when I was interrupted. Our little red car flipped upside down on the freeway – a truck swerving into our lane.

The weeks in the hospital were blurry. I remember being scared, and wanting Nigel. He wasn’t there, at first. I was kept in the dark.

And then slowly, the days began to return to us. Nigel and me, in our little house, different than it had been before. He didn’t seem to be the same. Instead of working late at the lab, Nigel would lock himself away in the home office.

“Sherry, can I get you anything? A blanket?” Nigel leaned over my armchair. He was lit by the glow of the Christmas tree, the house decorated while I was still on bed rest.

I had watched him, over the weeks. Seeing the way he methodically diced my vegetables, the order in which he dressed himself, how he studied my every move as I recovered from the accident.

“I’m a bit warm, actually. But thank you.” I reached up for him. He met me halfway, and planted his lips on mine.

I noticed more oddities. He began keeping a notepad by the bed. Nigel wouldn’t wait to get to the lab, or to the home office; I’d hear him scribbling in the middle of the night. His thoughts seemed to be working overtime.

Once, I shifted in the blankets and put my face next to his. He started.

“Oh, Sherry! I didn’t know you were awake.” I pressed my cheek to his shoulder, looking over the notepad before he could pull away. The writing was precise; every equation perfectly balanced. I watched him, searching for a familiar look. I couldn’t find any warmth. His face stared blank and cold.

I turned right back over, and could not sleep again.

Then, while Nigel was out, I let myself into the home office. To extinguish my nagging concern with some kind of answer. Nigel hadn’t been himself. Indeed, maybe he wasn’t.

Hastily, I began searching through the documents. One of the filing cabinets was locked with a combination – my birthdate was the code.

I grabbed a file labelled with our last name and began to read. As I did, I felt as if tears would well up in my eyes. My brain was racing with every line. Computers, of course, like Nigel always said. Computers with the capacity to walk and talk like humans. To think like them. To replace them, if necessary. The file detailed the replacement of a human, placing their thoughts, memories, into a robotic form.

I looked up to see Nigel standing in the doorway, his mouth agape.

“I didn’t want you to find out like this,” he said, quietly.

Screams erupted. I dropped to my knees. Heaving as if to vomit, but nothing would come. I repeated my denials over and over. Nigel just held me, his body against my own. I felt his steady heartbeat. Beneath my own skin, I could feel nothing but the twitch of machinery.