



OUR JEWISH ROBOT FUTURE

A Novel about the Garden of Eden
and the Cyborgian Transformation of the Human Race



LEONARD
BORMAN



our jewish
robot future

A NOVEL ABOUT THE GARDEN OF EDEN
AND THE CYBORGIAN TRANSFORMATION
OF THE HUMAN RACE

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UNCORRECTED GALLEY PROOF

SCARLETTA
PRESS

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Scarletta Press

10 South Fifth Street, Suite 1105

Minneapolis, MN 55402

www.scarlettapress.com

(Copyright page information to come)

chapter

ONE

meeting
rabbi merton

Bella bambino, light of my life, luck of my loins, you coo inside your cradle, your little eyes shifting from one raised arm to the other. You are the future, the *alfa Robota*, Roberta for short. Stretched in a hammock beside you, I swing gently, charmed by the fascination you have with your arms. “Holy transformers,” your eyes seem to say. “What the hell are these for?” My line of sight takes you in, the rich colors of the backyard flowerbed and the clear blue sky beyond. The afternoon sunshine feels *fantastico*. Who would think the world could ever end? Sometimes the rhythm of the cradle and the hammock aligns us, enabling me to give your cradle a gentle shove.

You were programmed to carry forward the Haralson family history one thousand generations. I was determined our family lineage be remembered as more than just entries in a genealogical record. I’ve inserted a little pink computer chip in you, just to be sure.

Future Haralson generations can research us and, if they fancy, add chapters of their own escapades. In a million years, our descendants will know that my fierce husband, Alex, was

an accountant, a rather impatient one; an intellectual explorer, a rather pedantic one; and an enthusiastic golfer, truth-be-known, a rather poor one. They would know I was born in Roma, Italia, was a good cook and a homemaker who ran a tight ship. I was good at languages because my papa was a wandering Jew who met my lovely mother in the Quarter and settled down *shnel* into the baking trade so he could keep her. In the bakery I heard every language, and one day the language of love, when my Alex came to claim me and bring to America. I imagine our future kin saying, “Weren’t they wonderful.” Cain and Abel became well-known because they fought. If they hadn’t, I doubt the Biblical names would have raised an eyebrow. The Haralsons are different. We get on fine as long as Alex acknowledges that I’m always right and gives me what I want. Thus, *bambino*, we have peace and longevity.

You and I sway over the exact spot where the scene of the crime occurred. Well, it wasn’t exactly a crime. Your father and I, on occasion, had intimate relations in this hammock, usually under cover of night, but not always. The entire city of Birmingham, Michigan, heard us, or, to be more accurate, heard me, because for days after our last, rather extreme encounter, my husband received strange and knowing looks from our neighbors. In fact, the city Animal Control Department called once, asking if we were keeping coyotes in our yard. Schmucks! They know nothing of passion!

On another occasion, I was relaxing in this spot when a relative showed up unannounced at the front door. Retired, with nothing to do, Alex embraced him, finding him intellectually stimulating. I concluded he was attempting to *schmorr* money from a rich relative. I said to his face, “Go back home. Mingle among your own kind, the lazy lay-abouts.” Besides, his after-shave nauseated me. We didn’t know he was one of Danziger’s spies.

If I’m talking too much, Babybot, you’ll just have to put up with me. I’m post-partum and post-menopausal. You don’t have anything better to do except gurgle and poop. Just think,

one day you'll grow up and marry a blabbermouth just like me. I may be madder than a hatter—whatever that means—but this spot is now my perch; a place to express myself, to pontificate, to spill the beans. I hope you're listening. At what point in time do I start? Do I start from now and work backwards? Do I start at the beginning? Do I start in the middle and go in both directions? Yes, that seems most reasonable and the simplest. Listen, Baby, to the story of your conception.

Once upon a time your father and I waited in the reception area outside *Rabino* Merton Freyburg's study. Besides our agendas, I planned to mention that the couch needed replacing. Sitting on it made my *tusch* itch. I leafed through a *Hadassah Magazine*, while across the rattan coffee table your father folded his arms and raised his round chin, fixing his gaze at the ceiling. He made me nervous. I wasn't sure what he pondered, but knew the wheels in his brain were grinding overtime.

I suggested picking up a magazine to read. He scowled at me, nostrils flaring. He glanced down at his wristwatch; slowly his eyes rose and telescoped, taking direct aim at me. I knew what that meant: Merton was late and Alex was having *shpilkas*. He was measuring Merton's tardiness. My Alex timed everything: wait time at doctor's offices, wait time for waitresses to take an order, telephone wait time on hold, and now wait time for Merton Freyburg.

Alex muttered that friends don't make friends wait. That when Merton came to his office, his secretary escorted him in immediately. God forbid he should keep his Rabbi waiting. And that was equally true for Merton. To be exact, *never* keep your accountant, congregant, best friend, supporter, or protector waiting.

I said, "*Bubele*, what's your complaint? You're retired." His eyes shot daggers at me. I suggested we go home. "Merton can work on more important matters. He doesn't want to hear *mishegaas*." I knew Alex couldn't wait to tell Merton his story. Alex squinted, sat back in his seat, and kept silent. He realized

he was beaten, for now anyway. I too was eager to speak to the Rabbi.

Before his recent adventure, a golf game would have been foremost on your father's mind. But the night before, when I walked into the living room to tell him supper was ready, he was standing in front of the fireplace lecturing to empty sofas, using sweeping gestures. He looked up, and, seeing me, relaxed. He knew Merton would *plotz* when told about the robots.

I said, "You've rehearsed your story umpteen times. I'm sick of it. Anyway, we're meeting Merton to discuss our unmarried children, not your nonsense."

That got Alex's dander up. "Those *pishers*," he said, "have *chutzpah*, getting in the way of my agenda. Their behavior gives me heartburn."

I said, "Those *pishers*, as you say, are your children. They aren't some watermelons I shit out."

Your father fumed. "Excuse me. Let me qualify my remark. They became educated mental *pishers*." He ranted that our son, a doctor, a grown man with a beard, should be looking after his parents, not living in the basement smoking weed while totally immersed in Playstation2. And our Master of Social Work of a daughter ought to return home to Michigan and quit counseling immigrant *shtunks*.

I gave a knowing look and said, "Are you including Italian immigrants?" He backed down with a sheepish shrug.

Alex clasped his hands, pleading, "What are they waiting for? Do they think they are Sarah and Abraham, to get married and have children in their dotage?"

I dared not say out loud that I thought our daughter having a child out of wedlock, even with a *shtunk*, would be better than no grandchild at all.

I said, "Alex, why do I love you? Because you're direct, because you leave no wiggle room, or because your patience is zero?"

Alex's punctuality found its way into our family life. Many

years ago, when my pregnancy reached nine months, he asked if I was ready to go to the hospital. Forget that labor pains might be a better indicator of readiness. Babies shouldn't keep fathers waiting!

Despite his rant, Alex insisted we open our conversation with Merton by telling him about his trip to the Garden of Eden.

I retorted, "How about a closer: Shut up! The children come first. Before we aggravate ourselves to death fighting about whose agenda should be first, let's keep some distance between us. What I put up with from you should earn me sainthood."

"Jews in America don't become Saints."

"Italian ones do."

"What are you, a comedienne? Jews can't be saints, woman!"

"Pedantic wretch," I snarled.

I wasn't sure if I was better off with your father sitting on the other side of the table or next to me. Since his return from Airets, my libido had been calling at weird times. My friend Annabel, Merton's wife, found that unusual. She said sex drive slowed after menopause. I knew better. If my husband sat next to me, I might have made a scene. I might have uncontrollably combed my fingers through his flowing gray hair. We sat apart—otherwise ear nibbling might ensue.

I secretly wanted to confuse Rabbi Freyburg's secretary, Edith Smith, whom I detest. Let her think we're there for marriage counseling. What other conclusion could she reach when couples sit separately? Edith must have witnessed the same scenario a thousand times: couples sitting separately in the waiting room, muffled drama with the Rabbi, and exiting in tears.

Edith worked in a glass cubicle. Her profile was in my direct line of sight. I noticed she occasionally peered at us. She closed the glass window and continued to type on her computer. Then the unthinkable happened: I saw that her lips were moving.

That sneaky bitch wore a telephone headset and she positioned the microphone so I couldn't lip-read her gossip. Everyone associated with the synagogue knew Edith. She worked with a calm demeanor. That was a front.

I could just hear her: "Alex Haralson is finally having trouble with that crazy Italian wife of his. I said it would happen years ago, didn't I?" She relished the troubles of others. Why had we decided to split up? Was it money? Or was it an affair? *She's mad, that woman, mad! Divorce, divorce, divorce—Oh I can't wait.*

She knew me from prior visits to Merton. She'd heard the scoop when Merton verbally spanked me because I was too flirtatious at Sabbath services. She broadcasted it to her friends. The gossip got back to me. I retaliated. I told a Women's Club Meeting, "Edith'll be looking high and low for a second husband. Her shopworn Salvation Army outfits are a fright. It's no wonder. She has no *saychel* to go to a Hadassah Thrift Shop and buy donated designer clothes. Her haggard appearance reminds me of Mrs. Frankenstein. Her lipstick reminds me of a fire engine. And I can't decide whether she's wearing a black *sheytl* or she covered up her gray hair with shoe polish."

She'd want revenge, so I knew her heart pounded for details. Calls to all her friends with the news couldn't wait until we left the building. But the most she would hear through the Rabbi's walls would be strident remarks about our progeny.

Edith opened the glass partition and said Merton should be coming in the door at any minute.

Alex folded his arms and gazed at me.

I stood and walked to him, sat on his lap, licked his ear, and whispered, "Relax! She's watching."

I turned my head and saw Edith gazing at us; her expression mechanical—the sack of vipers was trying to contain her disappointment.

Her husband died of a heart attack. Married to her, I completely understood. How else could he escape the marriage? She was a pain. As to her secretarial skills, the Rabbi only had

to look at his calendar to know where he was supposed to be. She set times for funerals, weddings, and office consultations. Note cards with Shabbat sermons went home with the Rabbi on Friday afternoons for review. Credit where credit's due: she was a damn good lackey.

Alex mumbled that Merton's tardiness was probably due to his working overtime rewriting sermons. Alex had complained before his voyage to the Garden of Eden that Merton's sermons sounded overworked, too balanced; in other words, tentative. I suggested, "Don't bitch about Merton's sermons. Lie and say you love them. Remember, one day you'll die and you don't want a two-word funeral service: Heave Ho."

My poor *marito* was a lost soul. He loved his work, but was forced to retire after a successful forty-year accounting career. His accounting firm's policy mandated retirement at sixty-five. He went into mourning, stopping short of tearing his clothes and pouring ashes on his head. I suffered too. I had attended many dinners when he wined and dined clients on a company credit card. Clients loved him and reciprocated by inviting him to dinner or to play golf at their lavish country clubs. That was the only time he was patient. Alex didn't mind at all if clients took eight or ten strokes per hole. What's the hurry?

All these perks stopped when the senior partner, Carter Benoni, went into Alex's office and asked impassively if he'd forgotten that the firm had a mandatory retirement age policy. Alex told him he still had a spring in his step and mentally had both oars in the water. Carter dismissed Alex's claims, saying "being able" didn't matter. Carter's obduracy didn't surprise Alex. Alex had teased Carter many times for his feminine mannerisms. He once informed Carter, "A real man looks at his fingernails with his fingers pointed inward." Alex once, seeing Carter in the hallway, pirouetted past him. Now, with Carter lording it over him, Alex tried to ameliorate the situation by saying how sorry he was for all the nasty ribbings of the past. Carter lifted his nose in the air. With seemingly no other

choice, Alex groveled. He fell on his knees and grabbed one of Carter's legs. He bawled while asking Carter what he was supposed to do for the rest of his life. Machine-like, Carter suggested Alex do pro bono tax returns for a while, and then maybe drop dead. Alex retorted that Carter was cruel. Poor people don't earn enough to pay taxes and therefore don't need a tax preparer. Carter's parting shot was a cold-hearted "Oh well. Then it'll have to be an early eternal nap." He shook his leg free from Alex's grasp and left the soon-to-be-vacated office.

Your father retired to teach accounting part-time at a local college. At other times he clipped coupons. He was handy when I had to do grocery shopping. He held the shopping list, brought the coupons, picked the freshest produce, and carried the groceries to the car. The shopping trips created a time and place for female admirers to mingle with him. It didn't matter what he wore or how he looked; they awaited his arrival. They teased with toothy smiles or knowing rubs on his back or arm. It infuriated my Roman blood, but what could I do? We had to eat.

I'll never forget what one admirer, namely Prissy Gum, said to my husband. She wanted a kiss, so she could stick her tongue down his throat. She didn't consider the embarrassment of leaving fiery red lipstick all over his face. I quickly stepped between them, but this bitch refused to back off. She put firm fingertips against my solar plexus saying, "Stand aside, you Italian hussy." She bent her head to look past me, saying to Alex, "Come over to my place anytime with a bottle of Viagra." She looked me in the eye. "You could never match my sexual prowess." With his looks and money, my husband could, in a heartbeat, run off with anyone.

Thank God he stood by his woman. He told me I shouldn't worry. Their huge rear ends and drooping breasts belonged on a used car lot. When I asked what about women with enhanced breasts, he said he preferred my swinging fun bags to volleyballs.

He met some of my male admirers: bald, gray, and overweight. He teased me about whether or not they could drive at

night or perform the hubba-hubba. I had no firsthand knowledge, nor did I have a rebuttal. He knew he had no competition.

My story was different. Homemaking to me was a numbers game: cleaning, cooking, and washing. When the children were young, there were four of us living at home. The number reduced to two as they left for college. With Roman returning home, the number upped to three. I, a normal Jewish mother, albeit an Italian one, wanted something more: grandchildren! Hello! But my son and daughter lived modern lifestyles—selfish hedonists! A crazy idea swam into my head. If my children refused to cooperate, I would take matters into my own hands and have my own baby, making sure the new addition understood me, married, and had children—third time lucky. That’s you, precious *bambino*, but *mama mia*, you did not come easy. The task required hurdling a big barrier. I was sixty-two years old. *Oy vey*, time passes like a wind from the mountains, our asses expand, then we’re forgotten like fallen leaves!

Prenatal encouragement arrived when I viewed a Wolf Winslow TV talk show. On it, several women told about conceiving and giving birth in their late fifties. Ah, I thought, here we go. One fifty-eight-year-old woman detailed her life after giving birth to a girl just two months earlier. She said, “No planning. It just happened.” I felt violently jealous as she described her happiness. Resolving my feelings would be difficult. I had to conceive first. I could get past the no planning part with my Latin libido. But how did I get past the “it-just-happened” part? Get an ovary transplant? Adopt a child? Right, like a Puerto Rican? *Oy*, My daughter was currently dating one. I was ready to collapse.

Another child was a pipe dream. The best I could reasonably hope for was a dog. I would name it Michelangelo Haralson. And would I ever lavish it with love! Many women my age do. They get *farputst*. The dog gets *farputst*. And they go out and strut together, either shopping or stopping off for a bite to

eat. It sounded like a very practical here-and-now solution. But the future looked obscure. The Haralson ability to speak would degenerate to being unable to carry a conversation past saying “Woof.”

Hurrying down the hall, Rabbi Freyburg approached, saying, “Margarita and Alexander, a thousand apologies.”

Attached to Merton’s six-foot-two-inch frame was a portion of flab. His suit jacket clinched around his shoulders and to button it required sucking in his stomach. He invariably wore this dark blue suit, sprinkled with dandruff, and black brogues, worn at the heel. He wore this outfit to weddings, funerals, and Sabbath services. Edith might have helped by sending Merton home on Friday with a note to Annabell: Buy new *shmateh*; visit cobbler.

What am I thinking? Edith dressed like a *shlump* too. I was holding back on telling Merton how shabby he looked. His blue yarmulke with a Star of David banded around the perimeter covered another problem: “Deconstruction Zone. Balding in Progress.”

He hugged me—a little too squishy for a dandruff-dusted, asexual spiritual advisor, but attention is always good. “*Come sta, Margherita?* How’s my Roman Lucille Ball?” He said, showing off his miniscule Italian. He held me way too long and I felt wood developing.

Miffed, I said, “*Bene, grazie.*”

He released me so that I could breathe again and hugged Alex as if he had the flu. “*Mazl-tov!* How’s it feel to be married to Sophia Loren?”

Alex lifted one side of his face, raised the opposite hand and shoulder, and limply said, “Expensive, expensive.”

I speak three languages and they equate me to a bimbo. You, baby, are going to know languages! Not like these *narish* Americans.

His arms thrown over our shoulders, Merton ushered us toward his study. I glanced at Edith. The luckless *shmegegi* now

knew for sure that we didn't need marriage counseling. I imagined the *yenta's* vocal chords going temporarily limp. No juicy gossip today, bitch.

I remembered waiting in this study a month before Alex and I married. We were to meet with a very late Rabbi Simirenko, a man whose gaberdine always smelled a little of urine, and who, when he finally arrived, counseled us about the importance of maintaining religion in our new roles as husband and wife. I didn't understand much at the time, having just arrived from Italy. We were young and had averred our wedding vows in bed. The official ceremony in the sanctuary tied up loose ends.

We entered Merton's study and I became giddy with its succulent atmosphere. Alex warned me beforehand that Merton had redecorated it with a faux biblical theme. Potted cacti and date palms littered the floor—a Garden of Eden replica, sans fruit tree. We needed to push aside shiny green branches bursting with leaves to find the seats. The Rabbi convinced the synagogue board that a new and unusual look would impress potential donors; they fumed more at the remodeling cost of \$250,000 than the decor. Alex, always in Merton's corner, told them it was worth every penny. Alex must have had a say in the design since the pile carpeting felt like a putting green underfoot. I wasn't so impressed, I thought parrot and monkey calls would have added a little ambiance.

On one side were picture windows looking out onto an atrium; on the other stood rows of bookshelves. My husband judges people by their libraries. "A house without books on display," he says at least once a week, "is no better than a dog's kennel." I waded through the foliage to get a look at Merton's bedtime reading. It comprised the usual rabbinical snore zone: Psychology, mythology, and self-help; lame biographies by yelping *qvetch*-artists; instruction manuals on how to practice sex after marriage. Get real already! The rate of abstention before marriage is about zero.

Significantly absent were a memoir about a visit to the Garden of Eden and a book on diseases robots might carry. Your

clever father planned to write a book on each of those subjects. Merton's *Playboy* collection, I presumed, was hidden behind a secret panel. And for myself I sought a medical text about having children after menopause. No such luck.

I noted a title, *Divorce from a Jewish Perspective*. How fitting for Edith. She could contribute a section on waiting room manners. She'd recommend telling the gossip to the secretary first and then the news to the Rabbi. I approached my seat. Behind Merton's desk hung various diplomas. Merton earned a master's degree in psychology. That was in addition to his rabbinical ordination diploma. I squinted to read his marriage counselor diploma. How can a rabbi with dandruff counsel anyone?

I sat in a cushioned chair and blew a palm frond away from my mouth. Your father, always ready to get down to business, was already seated. It certainly didn't mean I would allow him to talk about his agenda first.

Edith, who had been waiting by the door, walked in and handed the Rabbi his mail. As Merton went behind his desk, he asked us where we had been. He was right to ask. We hadn't been to Shabbat services recently. Alex had taken an extended trip while I flogged myself every day because my children and I had a different view of *it's about time you got married*. He nodded to Edith who stormed out with a *farbisseneh* expression and shut the door with a diploma-rattling din.

I thought, ah wonderful, she's left. The gladiators have entered the arena, ready for action. Places everyone! Engage!