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## **Metal Man**

The metal man wasn't always metal. He told me it started with an accident in a factory. What kind of factory no one really knows; it was so long ago that the metal man himself can't even remember. He was young back then, maybe seventeen, and he couldn't afford college, no matter how much he wanted to go, so he got a job at the local factory.

He was working a late shift one night, in the boiler room, when he heard a commotion from the main floor above him. He heard a clang and a thump and someone was screaming, but maybe not someone. The metal man said it was too animalistic, too primal. He remembers leaving the boiler room to go check on it and then he remembers the doctors telling him that he'd been crushed by a crane, telling him he was lucky to be alive. But the metal man doesn't remember there being any cranes on site.

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The physician found him in the attic after his father died. He was going through the old Christmas decorations, digging through cardboard, uncrunching old newspaper, when he came across the metal man—upright in the corner, draped in a large white sheet. The physician stared in awe, then stepped out to make a few calls while the metal man struggled to pull back his rusted eyelids.

The next day there were large white vans stationed outside of his house, coming and going, dropping and leaving. The kind of vans my parents always told me to stay away from. I guess the other neighborhood kids hadn't gotten the same memo, crowded around they waited and watched and listened. Grabbing on to every bit and piece of rumor they heard about the metal man. Eventually, the vans left but the metal man stayed, and the physician retreated into his house.

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Every Sunday morning, when the drugstore was closed, I used to go over to the physician's house to pick up my grandmother's prescription. I parked my bike next to the trash cans in his driveway, and ran inside to find the small orange bottle waiting on the kitchen counter. I would hear noises from upstairs. The physician and his colleagues moving around the attic, chatting about their latest discovery, but I never interfered. I grabbed the bottle and I left.

The metal man didn't interest me at first. Robots had existed for a while, they talked, they walked, they vacuumed, they sang. They even fucked occasionally, if they were that advanced. And that's what I thought he was, a robot or an animatronic, the kind of machines they put outside of circus tents or on the edges of big unsteady piers. You put a nickel into its gut and it spits out famous song lyrics or book quotes or some other sort of undisputed truth.

But one day, I couldn't get to the physician's house till evening. The door was still unlocked, but the prescription was missing from the counter.

"Anyone here!" I shouted.

I walked upstairs, my pale freckled hand gripping the railing just a bit too tight. My eyes were glued to the steps in front of me, to my brother's old scuffed up Vans.

"Hello!" I shouted again, no response.

At the top of the staircase was a wiry old tabby cat scratching at the wall. It looked up when I got there pausing and tilting its head.

“I’m guessing you don’t know where my grandmother’s prescription is, either.”

I knelt down next to it reaching out to scratch its ear, but the cat turned away and started walking.

“Or maybe you do,” I said.

I followed the cat.

All the doors upstairs were open. The physician’s bedroom and his office. The bathroom too, undergarments strewn about the blue and grey tiles. Then straight ahead, a steep wooden staircase, a soft glow emitting from the top of the steps.

I climbed the steps, heading towards the light. My grandmother always told me where there’s light there’s people, so I assumed the physician was upstairs in the attic, minding his science experiment like a 3rd grader prepping for the state fair. The cat, instead of leading me up the stairs, followed behind. Standing always in the shadow of my left calf, claws gripping at my pant leg.

There was no physician upstairs and the light didn’t come from a lamp, a computer screen, or even a candle—no the light came from the metal man’s eyes. A blinding yellow. Like I was staring at a god. Or a monster.

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He told me after the accident came a surgery. It was supposed to be quick and simple, just a few screws to hold up his spine with a nice zipper-like scar trailing down his back, and after a couple weeks of recovery, he could return to work. But the surgeons *fucked up*. For a while, the metal man didn’t know how, until about three years later, when his new doctor mandated an x-ray. They said it looked like the inside of Big Ben in there. Gears and screws, nuts and bolts, all oiled up from the greasy fast food he’d been eating. Couldn’t work, couldn’t cook, could barely drive, it was all he could afford.

The metal man’s doctor said the best move would be to add permanent exterior support. He said there wasn’t a surgeon alive that would cut into that wreck inside of him. He said it was a lawsuit waiting to happen.

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The metal man’s voice was deep and grainy. Like the voice of a war veteran with lung cancer. Like a soldier who fought in Vietnam, where Agent Orange chewed their insides raw. He looked like war too, like he’d been tortured by the Taliban and waterboarded in Guantanamo, like dogs had sniffed him out from under splintering floorboards and yanked him to the surface, digging into skin with their teeth, ripping and tearing. But the metal man never went to Vietnam, said he was too young—he didn’t go to the Middle East either, too old by then, too broken. He told me all this, the man, his voice shuddering.

“The crane didn’t do all of that, did it?” I asked, sitting on a stool in front of him.

He sat slumped in his chair. Wearing a pair of thick navy blue sweats and a stained purple sweatshirt.

“Not the crane,” he said, “the crane did nothing. It was everything else.”

“Everything else?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, and I think he tried to nod, but instead his face twitched to the side like it did sometimes, a mechanical whisper coming from under his hood. He sounded like a bomb, the ticker slowly counting down.

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On the operating table, they wrapped metal plates around his torso. Molded them to his ribs. He had trouble walking after that and finding shirts that fit around his chest. He spent his days wasting away on a couch in his grandfather’s basement.

He can’t remember if he was eight or seventeen, but his grandfather was the one who first introduced him to smoking, handed him a pipe stuffed with tobacco. Then later someone handed him a cigarette while they were waiting for the bus, a joint at a Grateful Dead concert, a bong at a frat party, a Twix with the end burning on Halloween night.

It wasn't the substances he was attracted to, just the smoke. It was the one thing he didn't mind about the factory, the smoke, the smog. The metal man could feel it making him light-headed, could feel himself floating away. It's all he ever really wanted to do, float away.

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"And now I'm stuck in this hunk of junk," he said, breathing heavy.

That sentence took effort. It was the most colloquial thing I'd ever heard him say. He usually stayed away from slang, anything that sounded too soft, that he couldn't enunciate.

"Stuck here," he repeated, glowing eyes taking a tour of the room.

"Why don't you leave?" I asked, leaning forward on the stool.

"If I could," the metal man said, lifting his arms but an inch off the sides of the chair and letting them crash back. I could see his biceps rattling under his hoodie. He was a vintage car in need of a jump start, and an oil change and some new wheels too.

"So when the physician fixes you—"

A shrieking cough that sounded like nails on a chalkboard found its way out of the metal man's throat.

"Fix," he repeated and his shoulders shook. Not a shriek but a laugh.

"Yeah, when he fixes you—"

"Not going to fix me," the metal man said.

"What?"

"I am broken, forever," he said, "sick forever."

"But couldn't he fix you?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then—"

"Won't."

I stared at the metal man, looking at the voice beneath his hood. The vague outline of eyes, nose and lips even. I saw his full face once. Wireframe glasses pressed into the side of his face, melted into his cheek, lips abnormally large and stuck in a perpetual state of resignation. His eyes like stop lights inside his head.

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My conversation with the metal man had left me looking for answers and there was one person I hadn't asked yet, one place I hadn't checked.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" the physician asked, he smiled the usual customer service smile as I approached the counter.

"I wanted to ask about the man—robot, actually," I said, leaning my elbows onto the counter. I put some Tic Tacs on the table to buy as well, an incentive.

"Really? What about?" He seemed excited but suspicious at the same time.

"Just wondering when you were gonna have him fixed by," I said. "You've been working on him for awhile, right?"

"Oh," the physician nodded, scratching at the bald spot on the top of his head, "well, you see the work I've been doing with the robot isn't about fixing it but about understanding. It's such an advanced piece of tech. I wouldn't know how to fix it, to be honest. We don't even know, necessarily, that it is broken, that it wasn't just made that way. It's all very interesting you see."

"He's broken," I said, my nails digging up the stickers on the counter, advertising Lucas's Car Wash, and The

Bradly Brother's Liquor store. "He's sick."

"Huh?"

The bell rang behind me and I turned. "Nevermind, I have to go."

"But your Tic Tacs!"

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My grandmother died a week or two later, a glass of wine, a mountain of prescriptions and a medical alert necklace on the bedside table next to her. There was an envelope on her dresser, addressed to *My Family* in which she said *I'm sorry, but it was time.* I went straight from her wake to the physician's house, it was Tuesday so I knew the physician was at work. I arrived on his doorstep in my scuffed up leather loafers.

"What if I fixed you?" I asked, pacing the floor of the attic, one of the physician's notebooks held tight in my hand.

"How?" is all the metal man said in return.

"I don't know, I'd figure it out," I said, "I'd read through the physician's notes and—"

"No!" he said, metal fists clenching, "the physician knows nothing."

I nodded, tossing the notebook to the side.

"Okay, so I'd figure it out myself. I'd fix you maybe not right away, but with time I could figure it out or maybe at least get you out of this place."

"No," he repeated, hands unclenched but shoulders still tense.

"But you don't like it here, right?" I asked, "you said it yourself, you're stuck. If I could fix you, then why wouldn't you leave."

"Not what I mean by stuck," he said.

"Then what do you mean?" I said.

"If I leave," he said, shrugging his arms, "what can I do?"

"Uh, you could go see a movie, there's a new one that just came out this weekend," I said, "it's another spiderman remake."

"No," he shook his head, "The people will see my face and scream."

"So what, you just want to stay here until you die?" I folded my arms, "I'm just trying to help."

"Why?"

"Because, because you're my friend," I said.

And then there was nothing, but the metal man's breathing his hands clamped onto the arms of the chair.

"Doctors cannot fix me, neither can you," he said, "neither can a smartmouth teenager."

"Hey!"

"Go make some teenage friends, teenager."

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He can't die. I figured it out while reading one of the physician's notebooks. He can't die but, I think he wants to.

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It was after the third procedure. The one where the surgeon strung wire from the tips of his fingers to the base of his neck, and fused metal braces to his shins and thighs, with hope that they might help him walk again. That was when

the metal man first attempted to kill himself.

He hadn't even been discharged. The metal man wheeled himself into the elevator and went all the way to the roof, where he tipped himself out and over the edge of the building. He doesn't remember making it to the bottom. Just like he doesn't remember most things. But he remembers the pain and a nurse asking how he got outside without being noticed.

He tried dropping an anvil on his chest, to cave in his ribs, collapse his lungs. But everything bounced right back up. Like a dog's chew toy, broken and spent, still wheezing out slow breaths. The next summer he tried to slit his wrists. No blood.

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The Sunday after my grandma died, the metal man asked me to reach into his mouth. Snake my hand down his throat and stop when I reached what felt like a wad of cash. "Take it," he said, his voice came from elsewhere but his lips still twitched out of habit around my arm, if he had teeth I might have flinched.

"What for?" I asked.

"Fireworks, buy fireworks."

"It's illegal, I'm only sixteen," I said.

"Everything's illegal," the metal man said, "find a way."

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Before I left, the metal man had me pour a glass of wine down his throat. When I was done with the glass, he told me to empty the bottle. I did as told, trying not to wonder where the liquid would go, how it would move through his empty body. I pictured one of those tube-like waterslides, except rougher looking, beef jerky looking, petrified esophagus, and crimson red swishing against the sides.

I watched his eyes gloss over, and his grip weaken on the chair, his posture never perfect but now not even there, just a puddle of metal, like a bike chain that's come undone.

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I bought the fireworks of some kids at school, traded the money for ground spinners and firecrackers, bottle rockets and roman candles. Back at the physician's house the metal man asked me to take all of the physician's notes out of the attic and down to the driveway. He told me to douse them in kerosene and place the fireworks in a circle around them. He told me to light them and run.

I asked him if he wanted to watch, if he wanted me to help him downstairs, or at least over to the window that looked down at the street. He said—

"No, the sound will be enough."

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The moment I felt the heat hit my hands everything became real. I thought lighting the match would be hard. Then I looked up at the attic window, thinking of the man I couldn't see, the man that I would never really see, that didn't want to be seen. I let it burn.

The sound was enough. The sound, the colors in the sky, the bonfire on the ground. I stood off to the side and watched, hidden behind the neighbor's bush. A car pulled up. The physician jumped out of the passenger side and fell to his knees, pulling out his hair as he recognized the notebook scraps on the ground. His friends spotted me.

"Hey!" they yelled, "you see who did this?!"

There was one Roman candle left, sticking out of my back pocket. I lit it, turned and pedaled, riding away in a blaze of glory. "Hey!" They yelled, sneakers pounding on the pavement after me. "Get back here!"

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When he had finished mourning his research, the physician ran to the attic, not sure what he was hoping to find. He should've called the paramedics when the metal man started leaking wine. They should've filled him with water to even it out, to get him sober. Instead, the physician ran and got the DAWN liquid dish soap and WD-40 from his

basement, while his buddies called a local mechanic. Nothing worked of course, so the physician sent the metal man away, to a scrap yard a few towns over. I hid among the neighborhood kids, watching as they loaded him into the mechanics truck.

They thought it was the rust and the corrosion that did him in. They thought the dampness of the attic had seeped into the machine, broken him down. Called him a lost cause instead of a loss. There was no funeral, no memorial. Nothing but the lights in the sky, but the scorch marks in the physician's driveway.