



## **There Will Be School Tomorrow**

Ted O'Neill

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**E**vening had begun to fall. In the cities the streets became more quiet and less active. The women moved around making soft, relaxing sounds as they cooked. Outside the city in the small towns the insects started singing, and the cool smell of the soil began to rise out of the earth. But everywhere, in the cities and in the towns, the children were late coming home from school.

Mothers and fathers made a few telephone calls, but the answering machines at the schools gave back the same everyday answer. "The schools are closed for the day. Please leave your name and your question. We will record your question for the next day."

Then, the telephones in the houses began to ring. "Is Johnny home from school yet?" asked one parent.

"No. Is Jane?" replied Mrs. Malone.

"Not yet. I wonder what is making them late?"

"Something new, I guess. Oh, well, the robot teachers know best. The children will be home soon."

"Yes, of course. It's foolish to worry," said Jane's mother.

The children did not come home.

After a little more time a few parents got in their cars and drove to the schools. The robots met them. They brought the worried parents inside. But the children did not come home.

And then, just as all the people were beginning to become worried and wonder what to do, the robots came walking. All of the robots from the elementary schools, and the high schools, and the colleges came. All of the school staff came walking. The robot teachers were all saying, "Let's go into the house where you can sit down." to the parents. On every city street and every small road in the countryside, the robots were entering houses.

"What's happened to my children?" asked one mother.

"Please go inside and sit down," answered the robot.

"What's happened to my children? Tell me now!" she asked again in a louder voice.

"Please go inside and sit down," answered the robot in exactly the same way.

Robot brains are made of metal and wires. They work by electricity.

Their brains were not flexible. How can you make metal speak and give you an answer? How can a human make a metal robot explain its reasons? All the people everywhere went in their homes and sat down. They waited for an explanation even though they were very worried.

Now the streets were empty. There was no one outside the houses. Terrible sounds of surprise and awful pain came from inside all of the houses. Then, in a little while, it was silent. The robots came out of the houses and went walking back to the schools. The cities and the small towns in the countryside were very strange. Suddenly, it was silent. Something was terribly wrong.

The children did not come home.

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**I**t was the morning before the robots walked out of the schools. Johnny Malone was the Mayor's son. He had so much energy and was so excited that he jumped out of bed. He moved quickly to pull off his pajamas and pull on a pair of blue jeans. He didn't put on his socks, but ran in his bare feet into his mother's bedroom. She was still sleeping. All of Johnny's running and jumping didn't wake her up. He thought and waited. Then Johnny gently touched his mother's shoulder.

"Mother!"

His sleeping mother moved a little bit. She turned toward him. She had special beauty cream on her face and it was shiny. Finally, she opened her eyes. She was not happy. Johnny knew because her voice was hard and sounded rough.

"What is it, Johnny?" she asked.

"Today's the day, Mom. Remember?"

"The day?" she raised her eyebrows and looked like she couldn't remember.

"The new school opens. Now we'll have robot teachers like everyone else. Roboteachers! Will you make breakfast for me, mother?" he asked.

"Amelia will fix you something," said his mother.

"No, please Mom. Amelia is just a robot. This is a special day. And I want my father to help me with my math homework before school. I don't want the roboteacher to think I'm stupid."

His mother became more upset. She looked sad and said "Now, Amelia can make your breakfast like she always does. Today is not so special. And I don't think it is a good idea to wake your father. You know he likes to sleep late in the morning. Now, you get out of here and let me sleep."

Johnny Malone turned away from his mother. He was in trouble. He knew he was too old to cry like a little boy. He tried hard not to cry. He walked more slowly now—not running or jumping. He went into his father's bedroom. He had to shake his father to wake him up.

"Dad! Wake up, Dad!"

"What's wrong? Oh, Johnny." His father's eyes looked empty and sleepy.

"What on earth do you want?"

"Today's the first day of roboteachers at my school. I can't understand my math homework. Will you help me before I go to school?"

His father was so surprised that he just looked at Johnny very hard.

"That's a stupid idea. Why do you think we have roboteachers? They're supposed to teach you. If you already know how to do math we won't need roboteachers."

"But the roboteachers may be angry if I don't have my homework."

Mr. Malone turned toward his son. He bent his arm pushed himself up.

"Listen, son," he said. "If those roboteachers get angry at you, tell them you're the Mayor's son. OK. Now get out of here before I get angry!

What is the name of that helper robot? Amelia? She will get your breakfast and get you ready to leave for school. Now please, get out of here and let me go back to sleep."

"Yes, sir." Johnny Malone went down the stairs to the kitchen. He wanted to cry. Johnny's parents weren't different. They weren't special. He understood. Every family had robots to feed the kids and take them to school. Johnny had a new, different problem. He thought today was a little bit special. Downstairs Amelia, the robot servant, placed a bowl of hot cereal on the table in front of Johnny. Johnny still felt upset and didn't want to eat. But, he tried hard to eat a few bites. Then, Amelia checked the weather and his clothes. Everything was OK, so she let him out the door. The new school was only a few blocks from his home, and Johnny could walk to school.

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**T**he newest school stood on the edge of this large city in the middle of the country. Johnny could see great big tall buildings behind the school. These blocks of very tall buildings in the city were made of strong concrete and plastic. In front of the school, the land was flat and open. There were wide-open fields as far as Johnny could see. The fields went all the way to where the land meets the sky.

A helicopter-car flew down quickly and landed in front of the school.

Two men and a woman got out.

One man was Doctor Wilson from a government office for schools. He was tall and thin and wearing an old-fashioned brown wool suit. He lifted his arm and pointed at the building and said, "This is it, Senator".

The Senator was the second man. He was bigger and heavier. He wore a nice, new grey business suit. He was very proud of himself and thought all of his ideas were very important. But, when he turned to the woman in the group, he was careful and respectful.

"This is the last one, my dear. Doctor Wilson has called this school the greatest achievement in man's education."

"By starting this school today, we removed the last human teacher. All of the normal weak points of human teachers are gone. No more angry teachers. No more stupid teachers. No more unfair teachers. The roboteachers are perfect." said the Senator.

The woman put on her very fashionable glasses and said, "How interesting. But really, there have been roboteachers for years, right? Didn't we have them a long time ago?" She waved her hand toward the school, and looked at Doctor Wilson in his brown suit as she asked her question.

"Yes, of course. Your women's clubs fought against having roboteachers years ago. But, that was before we proved how useful they are."

"I think I can remember something like that. Oh well, it doesn't matter," the woman said as she waved her glasses around slowly.

Wilson wanted them to enter the school so he asked, "Let's go in? OK?"

The woman wasn't sure. She stopped and waited. Senator said politely, "That's the reason for our visit. Doctor Wilson would like you to see his project."

The man in the brown suit nodded his head. His face became very hard and tense. "I worked to create schools with roboteachers," he said. "But, we're making a great mistake. No one is interested in educating the children any more. Parents let robots do it. And they forget about training their children at home."

The woman looked shocked. Her eyes looked strange. She turned toward Wilson and asked, "But really, aren't the robots the best teachers?" Wilson replied, "Of course they are. But I'm worried. Adults should be interested in what the robots teach and how they teach it. What's happened to the old Parent Teacher Association? What's happened to parents controlling their children? What's happened to—"

Wilson stopped suddenly and smiled. His smile was tired and showed some regret. "I guess I worry about this much too much. Come on inside."

They passed through a perfectly clean hall made of green plastic. The plastic was flat and dark. It didn't look very nice. The man in the brown suit pressed a button outside one of the classrooms. A door moved silently to the side. A robot stood in front of the group of three visitors. The roboteacher waved gently to them to enter. They followed the robot into the classroom. Another robot was teaching at the front of the classroom. There were pictures on a black plastic board. There were models made of metal wires on the desk in front of the robot. The three

visitors listened for a minute. At first, the woman looked interested even though she didn't want to be.

"Mathematics," Doctor Wilson whispered quietly in her ear. "Children begin with basic, old Euclidean Geometry<sup>1</sup> and Aristotelean<sup>2</sup> thinking. We start by teaching them these old ideas. After students learn those simple subjects, they begin intermediate classes in mathematics and logic."

"Really! Really?" The woman sounded bored and tired. She looked at Doctor Wilson through her very special glasses. "Do you mean there is more than one way to do math? Is there more than one way of thinking?" she asked as she almost laughed.

Doctor Wilson nodded his head yes. His face started to turn red. The Senator looked at Doctor Wilson quickly and tried to make him feel better. The woman moved toward the door. At the door the robot bowed. The woman waved her glasses to say thank you and said, "This visit has been really very special!"

Wilson was in very serious trouble. He spoke quickly and said, "Would your women's clubs please just visit our schools? If they did, they could see all work we are doing ..."

"Really. Really. Really! I'm sure the robots are doing a great job. Because that's what you made them for."

Wilson called, "Socrates! Come here!" The robot came closer from his place outside the classroom door.

"Why did we build you, Socrates? Tell the lady why you were built."

Socrates made a sound in his throat. "Umm, hmm." In his beautiful metal voice he said, "We were made to help the children. The children are the heart of our society. If we raise good children, the future will also be good. I will do everything for a good life for the children. This is my first rule. All other rules are less important than good things for the children."

"Thank you, Socrates. You may go."

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1. Euclid about was a Greek mathematician. He lived in Alexandria, Egypt around 325 BC–265 BC. We don't know much about his life, but many people call him the father of geometry. Geometry is part of mathematics. Euclid's geometry describes things we see in the real world. There are other kinds of geometry too, which are much more complicated. Learn more: <http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euclid>

2. Aristotle was one three great philosophers in ancient Greece. Socrates was first. Plato was second. Aristotle was the third. These three thinkers began the way of thinking that we call Western philosophy. Aristotle also wrote about Logic. Logic helps people to decide if something is true or false. Learn more: <http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle>

The robot's metal footsteps moved away. The woman waved her hands again. "That was very good-very interesting. Socrates works very well. And now, Senator, can we go? We have to go and meet the others for tea at the women's club. Our special guest, Mr. Varden, will talk about his newest drama. It is a very funny musical play."

The Senator spoke firmly in a strong voice, "Thank you, Doctor Wilson." The Senator smiled, but he looked a little bit sorry too. The Senator needed to say two very different things with his smile. The women's clubs had many members. The Senator wanted help from those members. However, the Senator wanted Wilson to understand him too. The Senator also wanted Wilson's own help and support. Wilson watched the Senator and the woman get back into the helicopter and rise into the morning sunshine. He kicked the dirt with his shoe and turned to find Socrates behind him. Socrates spoke in his metal voice.

"You are tired. I have a suggestion. You should go home and rest." said the robot.

Doctor Wilson replied, "I'm not tired. Why can't they understand me? Why can't they see? How can those people be so blind? Why don't they care about the children?"

"It is our job to teach the children. You are tired. I have a suggestion. You should go home and rest."

How can you argue with metal? Socrates was a perfect machine. He was designed for his job. And, he worked so well together with a hundred other perfect machines. The doctor couldn't help. What could he do? What can you do when a thousand schools are so perfect they can work well without help from humans? What will happen when schools don't need orders from people? And, this is even more important. What will happen when there are no human weak points and no mistakes?

Wilson stood quietly and looked at his school for a long time. He stared at the extremely big building and organization he had helped to create. The doctor had the feeling that something was wrong. He thought that parents should think carefully about the new schools and the new robot teachers. If parents did that, they could understand that something was wrong.

"You are tired."

Wilson nodded at Socrates. "Yes, I am tired. I will go home."

Once, on the way home, he turned and looked back toward the school and he had a strange worried feeling.

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**A** bell rang inside the school. The children walked together into the large play area. This playground was in the center of the very big

building. The school building made a big circle around it. In a few places the children began to form small groups. The newest students were at the center of each group. These new students had moved to the town. They had been in other robot schools before.

"Is it true that the robot teachers will actually hit you?" asked one girl.

"It's true, all right," answered the new student.

"You're lying. It's only a story, like the Invisible Man or a dog with two heads. The human teachers never hit us here."

The new student didn't change his story. "The robots will hit you if you break the rules."

"My father is the Mayor," said Johnny. "And he says no robot can ever hurt a human."

"These robots are different."

The bell began to ring again. Free time was over. The children moved toward the classroom. All the children except one—Johnny Malone.

Johnny was big. He was 12 years old. And, he was the Mayor's son.

Johnny Malone kicked at the dirt. A robot teacher came closer. Johnny could hear the robot's metal voice.

"The ringing bell means that classes are starting again. You will go to your desk, please. Take your place, please."

"I won't go inside," said Johnny

"You will go to your desk, please. Take your place, please."

"I won't. You can't make me take my place. My father is the Mayor."

The metal voice had no feeling in it. "If you do not go to your desk you will be punished."

"You can't hurt me. No robot can."

The robot moved forward. Two metal hands held Johnny Malone.

Johnny Malone kicked the robot's legs. That hurt his toes! The robot told

him, "They made us to teach the children. We can do anything to teach the children. I will do everything for the children's good. It is my first rule. All other rules are secondary. All other rules are less important than the children's good."

The robot teacher moved its arms. It put the human body across its metal knees. It raised its metal hand and then dropped the hand. The robot teacher dropped its hand flat, very flat so that Johnny felt pain and his skin turned red. But the robot teacher did not make a mark on Johnny. It did not damage the human body. Johnny Malone was surprised and shouted. Johnny Malone cried. Johnny Malone moved like an animal and tried to escape. The metal robot teacher ignored everything. It helped Johnny Malone stand up again. It put him back on his own feet. Johnny

ran and jumped against the robot, hitting it with his small hands. Johnny rolled his hands into fists. He hit the solid, smooth metal of the roboteacher's legs with his fists. Nothing happened except that Johnny hurt his own hands. They started to turn purple.

"You will go to your desk, please."

Tears were useless. Anger was useless. Metal cannot feel. Johnny Malone, the Mayor's son, was intelligent. He went to his desk and took his place in the classroom.

One of the more advanced literature classes was reading a poem aloud. The poem was very difficult, but beautiful too. The roboteacher spoke in his metallic voice about three strange sisters. These scary old women were witches. In the poem, the women watched the land and the ocean as they danced and sang about magic numbers.<sup>3</sup>

When finished, the roboteacher asked, "Do you know this poem?"

Hands shot into the air. The metallic voice said, "Tom?"

"That's from Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'."

"And what does it mean?"

"The strange sisters are making magic in the beginning of the play. They have heard the drum that tells everyone Macbeth is coming."

"That is correct."

Another hand shot into the air. "Question, teacher. May I ask a question?"

"You may always ask a question."

"Are witches real? Do you robots know about witches? And do you know about people? Can a roboteacher understand Shakespeare?"

The thin metal voice responded. "Witches are real and not real at the same time. The human mind is real, and witches are part of human minds because humans think about witches. Roboteachers keep and protect the human mind. We hold all the wisdom and the knowledge and the hopes of the human race. We hold these for you, the children. Humans trust us to keep everything for you. Your good is our first rule. It is our highest law. Do you understand?"

The children nodded. The metallic voice went on talking. "Let us return to 'Macbeth' to study one last part. In his first speech, Macbeth talks about weather, luck, and many others things. He says, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen.'"

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3. Here is the original poem from William Shakespeare's Macbeth that the roboteacher read to the children. "The weird sisters, hand in hand, Posters of the sea and land, Thus do go about, about: Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine, And thrice again, to make up nine. Peace! the charm's wound up."

"Children, what does 'foul' mean?"

Tom knew the answer again. "It means something bad. Maybe bad weather, or just a very bad day."

"And, 'fair'? Who knows what 'fair' means?" asked the roboteacher. "Not you Tom!"

A quiet boy in the back answered this time. "Fair means beautiful, right?"

"Yes," said the roboteacher. "This speech is very human and means a lot. How can one day be the worst and the best at the same time? Soon you will understand this better. Repeat after me, please, and try to understand it."

The children raised their small voices. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen."

The roboteacher stood up. "Listen! That's the closing bell. Do not run away. You will stay here tonight. There will be a school party, a sleep-together party. We will all stay here in the school building."

"You mean we can't go home?" asked one student.

The littlest girl's face made a strange shape and she cried, "I want to go home!"

"You may go home tomorrow. There will be a holiday tomorrow. A party tonight and a holiday tomorrow for every school on earth."

The little girl stopped crying for a moment. Her voice was weak and shaking. "But I want to go home now."

Johnny Malone, the Mayor's son, put one hand on the littlest girl. "Don't cry, Mary. The robots don't care if you cry or not. You can't hurt them. Crying doesn't stop them from doing anything. We'll all go home in the morning."

The robots began to bring folding beds and put them in rows in the schoolroom. There were many rows of these small beds. Some robots led the children out into the playground to play. One of the robots taught them a new game, and after that took them to supper in the school's lunchroom. There were no other robots in the building, but it did not matter, because the doors were locked so that the children could not go home.

The other robots had begun to walk out into the town, and as they walked the robots walked from other schools, in other towns. All over the countryside, all over the towns, the robots walked to tell the parents that the children would not be home from school. And the robots walked to do what they had to do.

In the schools, the roboteachers told stories until the children fell asleep.

**M**orning came. The robots woke up at sunrise. The children woke up with the robots. They ate breakfast and listened to more stories. Now the children made groups around the robots. Some children held onto the metal arms. Some followed closely. Others walked along and played behind the robots as they went down into the town. The sun was warm, and it was early, early, and very bright from the morning sun in the streets.

They went into the Mayor's house. Johnny called, "Mom! Dad! I'm home."

The house was silent. A robot moved smoothly and silently to the door. It answered "Mister Malone. Would you like breakfast, sir?"

"I've had breakfast. I want my parents. Hey! Mom, Dad!"

He went into the bedroom. It was empty and perfectly clean.

"Where's my mother and father?" asked Johnny.

The metal voice of the robot beside him said, "I am going to live with you. You will learn as much at home as you do at school."

"Where's my mother?"

"I'm your mother," said the robot.

"Where's my father?"

"I'm your father," said the robot.

Johnny Malone turned quickly. "Do you mean my mother and father are gone?" His eyes filled with tears and he almost started to cry.

Gently, gently, the robot's metal hand pulled Johnny against its metal body. "Your parents have gone away, Johnny. Everyone's parents have gone away. We will stay with you."

Johnny Malone looked quickly around the room.

"Of course. I should have known that they were gone. This house is so clean."

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**A**ll the houses were clean. The servant robots had cleaned all night. The roboteachers had checked each house before they brought the children home. The children were important and the robots must not scare them. There must be no blood on the walls to frighten the children. The robot's voice said gently, "Today will be a holiday so you can get used to the changes. There will be school tomorrow."

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#### **About the author**

Ted O'Neill began teaching English in rural Japan in 1990 as part of the JET Program. He has taught all kinds of learners: from kindergarten kids to policemen. He currently teaches English language skills and courses in literature at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. He has a life-long love for books of all kinds, but especially for science fiction.

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Helper

... by Ted O'Neill

... adapted from the original short story 'Benefactor' by George H. Smith

"Many people will hate and fear robots at first. They will see robots as a new and terrible problem. What will happen to workers when robots take their jobs? The engineers and professors who make new robot models and try to change the world will be called "robot lovers". Many people will be afraid and fight the robot lovers. But what happens next?"

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