

LEGS-11

Meet the home help.

BY HUGH CARTWRIGHT

Day 1: Alfred arrives via Amazon drone. A gift from our government — free, but compulsory.

He is beautiful: perfectly hemispherical, jet black, shiny, smooth; the size of a small dog. There's a manual, Apple-esque in its brevity: "Place your All-purpose Friendly Droid by a wall to self-power."

That's it. No on/off button, no remote control. Just a silky blackness. I place him by a wall and wait.

Nothing. Is he a dead droid? Did they forget the batteries? What is self-powering anyway?

Day 2: Into the kitchen for breakfast; Alfred is where I left him.

"Alfred, wake up." Nothing. He's useless.

But suddenly Alfred shivers, and from under his body, long metal legs like brittle tentacles unwrap. Eleven legs. Heavens, he's half a soccer team.

Fully unfurled, nearly as tall as me, he shuffles forwards. I move away; his legs skitter after me. Unnerving.

"Alfred," I say again.

Is this how I make contact? There's no response. Where are his social graces?

Day 3: Alfred has no eyes; not that I can find anyway. But he trails around, seemingly watching as I work, sit in front of the TV, superglue a broken plate. He's dog-like. Appealing, yet faintly irritating.

Day 4: Off to bed. As I go, Alfred spreads five tentative legs on the spiral marble steps that lead upstairs. Shiny metal legs terminate in shiny metal feet; they slide chaotically on the polished stone. What fool of an engineer thought metal feet was a good idea? But, harmless though Alfred is, I am relieved to see him stuck downstairs.

Day 5: At breakfast I discover that Alfred did the washing-up last night. I'm a bit spooked by this.

This afternoon Alfred opened the door to the postman. Eleven legs scared the hell out of him. I guess there can't be many Alfreds out in the wild yet.

Tonight Alfred unplugged the TV while I was watching (he's turning into my mother), reloaded the washing machine with clothes I'd already washed, and made a more determined — but still futile — attempt at the stairs.

Day 6: 4.30 a.m. A tremendous crash. Alfred



lies at the bottom of the stairs like a vast stranded beetle, legs in the air. Finally he hooks half a dozen legs over the arm of the sofa and rights himself. He must be really eager to see upstairs. I don't like the look of this.

Day 7: I've worked out the 'self-power' bit; it's time to squash Alfred's desire to get upstairs. Every night he settles down near a power point. He doesn't plug in, but the power monitor shows he's pulling a lot of juice, so tonight, before going to bed, I switched off power to the entire house. I think Alfred saw me, but he had no idea what I was up to.

Day 8: He's clattering around today as usual, but looks tired and grumpy (it's true: hemispheres can grump). I think I've got him beat. I'll turn off the power again to slow him down tonight.

Day 9: He's weaker still — I'm winning.

Day 10: Someone has turned the power back on; Alfred is rejuvenated. I'll padlock the cupboard that contains the power cut-offs before going to bed.

Day 11: This morning Alfred was hanging by one leg from the power cupboard, like a grotesque spider. He trapped a leg in the padlock. I had to use bolt cutters to chop off his leg.

Day 12: Ominous developments. I went downstairs today to find three Alfreds: my own, sans leg, and two new ones with the full complement. The chain on the front door was dangling; Alfred must have let them in overnight.

All three followed me around clanking gently. Pushing and nudging me. There's something afoot.

Day 13: Another one's arrived, with ambition. Within an hour he (?) was climbing the stairs. Managed three steps before toppling off. This is getting out of hand. But I have a plan.

I grab the leg of one of the newcomers and apply a drop of superglue to his foot. Knowing somehow that something is amiss, he squirms and struggles. By the time I've corralled all eleven legs and pushed them onto the floor the glue has dried and is too tacky to fix him in place.

The others watch this performance with interest.

A failure today, but just wait. Tomorrow I'll trap them in separate rooms, then superglue each to the floor, far from the walls so they can't self-power. When their batteries are drained, I'll bolt-cut them free and toss them out.

Day 14: Superglue's on hold; there are nineteen of the little buggers downstairs now, too many to tackle at once. They cover the entire floor of the sitting room. I need a Plan B.

(Later)

GREAT NEWS! No need for Plan B; they are doing the job for me! I peeked over the banisters to see Alfred carefully applying superglue to number 7. He waved his foot in front of the others for a few seconds — bloody prima donna — and then gingerly put it down. Fabulous; they are about to glue themselves in place.

Idiots.

(Later still)

I hear the front door opening. Looking into the hall I see still more of these things arriving; it must be a rave. When they all glue themselves together it'll be one helluva mess.

(Even later)

Now I understand.

They've used just enough glue to make their feet tacky.

There's rustling and scratching of a hundred metal legs climbing the stairs right now. ■

Hugh Cartwright is a retired Oxford chemist, now growing citrus on the Canadian west coast. This is his first story in a while.