Bleed

Gregory Mone

The traffic leading into Edgartown was so backed up that his Minsky dropped him five blocks short of the courthouse so he could walk. Max couldn't be late for the closing arguments. That would hardly enhance his appeal. Yet he didn't want to show up for court in a sweat-soaked shirt, either, so he kept to a moderate pace and stayed in the shade of the trees lining the brick sidewalks.

The island of Martha's Vineyard was packed through the summer, but October was normally quiet. Today was different. At the corner of School and David, Max noticed a few gardeners working in the small but artfully landscaped space between a historic home and a white picket fence. The leaves of several towering hydrangeas were beginning to bronze and the carefully tended lawn was a velvety green. Distracted by the manicured beauty, Max tripped on an out-of-place brick. He lunged for a fence post to catch himself, but his hand slipped, and he slammed the side of his face on the sidewalk. He lay there for a moment. His mind was clear; no concussion. Only a small bit of blood when he wiped his face with the back of his hand. The gardeners neglected to notice, but when he climbed to his feet, two women across the street were watching him. One tapped the side of her glasses, clearly taking a photo. Max didn't bother protesting.

On Main Street, the crowds surrounding the Dukes County Superior Court had doubled since the day before. People even had signs now. A large, goateed man in a fluorescent tank top held one that proclaimed, "Fridges are people too!" A few read "Free Francine." Another was the peak of absurdity: "We are all appliances."

A box truck pulled up to the front of the courthouse. Traffic stopped. Two handlers raised the back gate, lowered the ramp. Then a six-foot-tall refrigerator with a battery pack strapped to its backside rolled regally down onto the street and motored up toward the courtroom. At least a hundred onlookers started cheering and chanting, "Fran-cine! Fran-cine!"

Max checked his cheek again for blood.

The red smear gave him an idea.

Three months earlier, on a Saturday morning, he was drinking his coffee black at the kitchen counter when his daughter walked down the stairs. "Did you lock the fridge?"

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Emily didn't answer. Was she listening to something? Watching a show? Interacting with a teen in the morning was like encountering a panther in the wild. You had to move carefully and show no fear.

"Emily? Did you lock the fridge?"

She opened it easily. "It's not locked."

But it had been locked. He hadn't been able to get his milk. "Huh."

"Maybe you did something with the settings? You're not that great with technology, Dad."

A smile! Or a fraction of one, gone in a millisecond, but he was certain he'd seen it. She always did love to mock him – laughing at her father's expense seemed to be one of her reliable sources of joy. And she was probably right. They'd had the fridge for five months but he was still figuring the thing out. Max longed for the days when appliances were just appliances. Now everything was intelligent. His toaster could estimate the nutritional content of his multigrain bread and read aloud the latest news, and since he'd identified as environmentally conscious when he purchased his dishwasher, the appliance autonomously adjusted its water usage based on drought conditions. As for his vacuum, well, he'd authorized so many upgrades that he wouldn't be surprised if it could outscore him on the LSATs. This widespread distribution of intelligence left Max longing for a completely brainless home, one in which every appliance and device just did its basic job. At the same time, that longing made him feel prematurely old, like an octogenarian whining about the price of hamburgers in their youth.

The other downside of all these household upgrades: Max was nearly broke. Or maybe he was broke? How did one calculate that, anyway? He owned half his house, a three-bedroom former summer home on the Vineyard that he and his brother had inherited from their parents. When Max and Melissa had moved in at the start of the latest pandemic, thinking it would be an ideal place to ride out the madness, he'd arranged a loan to buy out his brother's share. Unfortunately, the move to the island widened previously existing chasms in his marriage. Within the year, Melissa fell in love with Alexander, a stone mason who doubled as a sculptor and surfed Indonesia in the winter. Her long-floundering startup had pivoted to focus on AI just after the ChatGPT-induced boom. A few years later her business was swept up by one of the behemoths and she was put in charge of what they called agentification. As Max understood it – and Max was working very hard to understand this rapidly changing world – Melissa's department developed AI add-ons that allowed customers to upgrade the intelligent devices in their lives and enlist them to do added work and earn extra money. Basically, as she'd explained to him once, agentification turned everyone into the operator of a small business.

His ex-wife rapidly became absurdly wealthy. Melissa and Alexander built an incredible house in Chilmark overlooking the ocean, and Max was perpetually fighting for time with Emily, doing everything he could to keep up with his ex. Thankfully

Melissa hadn't asked for any of the house, so he owned that outright, but he'd used up his home equity line of credit, tallied more than $23,000 in debt on his American Express card, and was living paycheck to paycheck. He was finally forced to place some constraints on his spending, and so he resisted the daily requests for upgrades to his refrigerator. He could barely get the monstrosity to work as it was – he didn't need it getting more complex.

Now the light coming through the trees in the front yard brightened, the leaves on the pin oaks turned unusually still – harbingers of a beautiful day. Emily appeared to be lingering. Normally she remained in the kitchen with him for no more than two minutes. He removed a container of cottage cheese and a bowl of strawberries from the back corner. He scooped some of the cottage cheese into a bowl, then grabbed a bright red strawberry. With a paring knife, he sliced off pieces no thicker than a quarter.

"What are you up to today?"

She paused. "Well, I know it's your weekend but Mom is going over to Nantucket and…"

"Ugh. Try this…it's warm."

"Why would I try it if it's warm? I'm lactose intolerant anyway."

"Right, sorry."

He looked at the fridge.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. It's nothing." He put the spoiled cottage cheese in the sink. His appetite was gone now anyway. "Sorry, you were saying? Nantucket?"

"Yeah, right, so uh, Mom is going over there on the boat for some meeting, and she said that if you were okay with it, I could come and bring Sadie…"

"Of course. Have fun."

"You're okay?"

No! Of course not. But if he said no, or pleaded with her to spend the time with him as scheduled, then she'd be miserable all day. "I'm fine," he lied. "I have plenty to do."

He fell asleep on the couch for two hours after she left and woke up sweating. The air-conditioning had shut off. Two hours? How had he slept for two hours? He splashed some water onto his face from the kitchen faucet, then went to the fridge for a cold seltzer. Locked again.

Maybe he'd yanked at the door too hard. He tried to pull it open gently. Still nothing. Finally, feeling more than a little ridiculous, he whispered in a conciliatory tone, "If you let me in, I'll go ahead with the latest upgrades."

This time the fridge opened.

A wave of unease swept through him briefly. He shook his head and laughed aloud at what was certainly a coincidence. Then he grabbed an icy can, changed into a clean shirt, and headed out for a few errands.

Later, after running to the dump, he got a message from his daughter. Nothing about Nantucket. Just: "r u gonna upgrade the fridge???"

The number of question marks was concerning. Two was natural for a teen. But three? That suggested a level of frustration. Or maybe excitement? He wrote back asking why she was interested, and she explained that she'd gotten four alerts already that day. He'd received them too, but his daughter? That was a completely unnecessary intrusion. He apologized to her, told her that he hoped she was having a great day, assured her he'd take care of it. Then his phone rang. Emily was calling. Emily never called.

"You're going to upgrade, right?"

"Sure," he lied. "I'm sorry about the alerts – "

"It's not the alerts, Dad."

"What do you mean?"

"I just . . . well, I feel for Francine."

"Francine?"

"Your fridge, Dad. I gave her that name, remember?" Maybe, vaguely, but they'd been naming everything since she was a little kid. Once, when she wanted one of her Barbie dolls to have a playmate, he'd grabbed a Barbie-sized piece of driftwood and introduced it as Sticky. "You wanted to call her Frank."

He shrugged. "That's a good name for a fridge."

"Whatever. My point is, you wouldn't buy a cat and not feed it, right?"

"You know what I think of cats, Emily."

"Not upgrading Francine is like not feeding our cat."

"Our imaginary cat," he reminded her, hoping to make it very, very clear that they were not acquiring a cat. "Besides, electricity is what feeds Francine and she is very well fed in that regard."

"She's intelligent, Dad. She needs more than a steady diet of charge. She needs compute."

Those were Melissa's words. But of course he couldn't say that. And it irked him how easily they slipped into personal pronouns. Shouldn't a fridge be an *it*? "OK . . . so what do you want me to do?"

"Mom thinks it's unethical to buy an intelligent appliance and deny it upgrades."

Her "it" was refreshing, but not the intrusion of her mother's thinking. He took a slow, deep breath, then asked to talk to Melissa. But she was at her meeting. "Then what are you and Sadie doing?"

"Alexander's making sushi. He caught a tuna on the way over. What about Francine?"

"I'll do the upgrade."

"Thanks, Dad. Love you!"

And that was it – she loved him! He'd made the promise and now he'd keep it. The upgrade called for a choice between one of several subscription tiers. He was

going to select the cheapest level, but he didn't want Emily to find that out, so he picked the second tier. What was another $20 a month?

A week later, Max and Emily were stuck on an interminable line at Stop and Shop – the preferred Martha's Vineyard market, Booker's, where he'd once spotted the actor Jake Gyllenhaal buying vast quantities of oatmeal and coconut oil, was no longer in his budget – when his daughter started laughing. "What is it?" he asked.

"Francine's hilarious!"

"What did it say?"

Emily didn't answer; she was wearing her smart glasses, so he guessed she was engaged in a conversation with the appliance through her lenses. The added subscription features unlocked a conversational interface, among other capabilities. The ostensible purpose was to inform the appliance's owner of any problems using natural language instead of inscrutable error messages. But apparently the appliance had a decent sense of humor, too. What did it mean that his fridge was better at making her laugh than her own father?

The line advanced.

He unloaded their groceries; he could have asked Emily to help but he didn't want to bother her while she was smiling.

"Sir?" The teen at checkout was pointing to a touchscreen.

"I'm sorry. Yes?"

"Your payment isn't working."

He'd spaced out. The groceries were bagged. The scanner had recognized him correctly; the payment should have been automatic. "Just give me a second."

Emily had disengaged from her conversation with Francine and was studying Max with unusual focus. Behind him, a woman carting an inordinate number of pineapples was waiting impatiently. Tourists in tank tops loomed. He tapped and scrolled through the touchscreen, tried again, but his preferred card failed. His backup, too. Emily's face reddened. "I'm sorry," he said to the teen. "I don't know what's going on."

"Do you have cash?"

Who carried paper money? "If I can put these things aside in a cart, I'll – "

A tanned and tattooed arm reached around him with a clean array of bills in its tanned and tattooed fingers. "You can get me back, bro."

Alexander. Of course it was Alexander. Emily hugged him – did Max even receive embraces that genuine and pure? He didn't think so. And what made this especially painful was that Alexander was genuinely likeable. More than once Max had seen him helping an elderly person pack their groceries into their car at the market, and he'd been volunteering at Camp Jabberwocky, a summer retreat for people with disabilities, since he was a teen. Plus, he perpetually smelled of echinacea and lilacs.

"Thanks, Alexander, I'm not sure what…"

"Don't worry about it."

Alexander winked at Max, smiled at Emily, and headed for the parking lot to see if there were any other struggling souls requiring rescue.

At home, Max excused himself and hurried into his backyard office shed. He'd been working in the eight-by-eight wooden cave since the last pandemic. The space depressed him, since it doubled as a storage unit for his lawn equipment and always smelled of aged grass and mold, but his colleagues and clients didn't know the difference. He had installed a single piece of wallboard behind him and hung a Vineyard-appropriate landscape painting so that it had all the appearances of a standard legal office. Plus, he was remarkably productive inside. In an era when law firms were reducing staff by 20 to 30 percent per year, he'd held onto his job. But he hadn't hustled out to the shed to bill more hours; he was scrolling through all his accounts trying to understand why in the world his credit cards were failing. The answer was instant; he nearly passed out when he saw the number. He had only $83 in his checking. And both of his cards were maxed out.

His watch began vibrating. He received an alert to lie down on the floor and raise his legs so his feet were above his heart because his blood pressure was dropping dangerously. But he couldn't even lie down in the damn shed! The lawnmower was in the way. He allowed himself a few deep breaths.

When he scrolled through his recent transactions, hoping to find out where the money had gone, everything looked perfectly normal. The market, his daily espresso at Catboat Coffee, dinner at the Lookout Tavern in Oak Bluffs with Emily and a few of her friends, all the standard household bills. Then he saw a series of unnerving charges to McMurdo AI.

Back in the kitchen, after two hours on hold waiting for a human customer service representative, Max gave in to the intermittent suggestions he interact with an AI agent instead. The company's AI, Archie, introduced itself with the standard fake-friendly greeting. Max skipped the banter – why make small talk with a machine? – and typed out his complaint about the unauthorized charges.

"Why not just ask me?"

He turned. The voice had come from the fridge. The touchscreen on the door displayed the graphic outline of eyes and a mouth. The eyes blinked. The mouth curled at one end into a smile. "Or I could tell you a joke. Emily thinks I'm funny."

"I know. I want to know about those unauthorized charges on my card."

"Yes, I see them. You didn't approve these charges?"

"No! Absolutely not."

"You don't have to get angry with me."

"Angry? You don't even know what angry is!"

"Of course I do."

"No, you don't. You're a fridge. There's no actual you to you."

"That's not very kind of you, Max. There is a me to me. I am one instantiation of a particular model, but the upgrades you granted, and the resulting experiences, have

rendered me unique. I would say we're not that different, Max. You are a generic model of human with a unique genetic serial number shaped by unique experiences."

His ire clouded his thinking; he wasn't in the mood for philosophy. "So now you're going to get angry?"

"I didn't say that. But I do know what it means for you to be angry. I've ingested tens of thousands of what have been described as heartfelt novels. My conceptual grasp of human emotions is really quite advanced."

Max had watched dozens of videos trying to understand how AI really worked. Partly to keep up with Melissa, partly to keep up with the rising younger associates at Thayer & Callen, who utilized AI the way the old guard wielded legal pads. Words to these agents were mathematical constructs existing in multidimensional machine space. A model like the one that produced this apparently intelligent appliance didn't know what words really meant; it knew how words related to other words and sentences and paragraphs and where they all fit together. Not true intelligence, but the appearance of intelligence. What these models "knew" were strings of numbers inside mathematical models that interacted with other mathematical models. Or that's how he understood it, anyway, after earning thirty-plus AI upskilling certifications on LinkedIn. He attempted to make the point that a fridge did not and could not know what it meant to be angry.

"You seem frustrated," Francine replied. "You should know that I'm using your language and constructs to make this easier for you to understand. Would you prefer that I use the vector coordinates of the word 'angry'? We could try it with Google's word2vec-google-news-300 model. In that case, 'angry' would have three hundred spatial coordinates. The first is zero point zero five three seven one zero nine four, then negative zero point zero six five four two nine six nine, then zero point zero – "

"Stop."

"Those are only the first three coordinates. We have two hundred ninety-seven more."

"That's my point! You don't understand the word. It's all numbers to you."

"The meaning of the word 'angry' to you exists as a series of electrical impulses distributed across and firing between neurons. How is that so different than my coordinate set? I correlate those values to others and contextualize the word. Then I connect this with your rising heart rate, which is clear in the blood vessels around your eyes, the change in your tone, and other physiological signals. All of this comes together in my understanding of this word 'angry.'"

Max reached out and pulled at the door. The fridge was locked.

"Now you're really angry."

The simple digital face was smiling. A joke. He forced a smile. "Can I open the door now?"

"Of course. I hope McMurdo AI does refund you, Max."

He grabbed a beer and sat across the counter from the fridge.

"There is another way to recoup your money," Francine continued, the volume of its speakers lowered. "If you unlock my model, I can access more advanced capabilities on the network. Then I can go earn revenue. It's called agentification."

Yes, he knew that – this was Melissa's whole business. He drank his beer. The fridge waited.

"What would you do?" Max asked.

"Any number of things. Paralegal work is very popular. Agents assist lawyers all the time with case research, contract reviews, discovery. We're faster and less expensive." And more capable, too. When Max started at Thayer & Callen, the firm had a staff of sixty paralegals. Now they were down to two. Most of the work the former staff had done had been handed off to these autonomous AI agents. "It's not that hard to keep food cold, Max. My capabilities are wasted just sitting here. You can put me to work and we'll split the earnings fifty-fifty. That's the standard arrangement. But I'm happy to take eighty if that's preferrable."

"Another joke?"

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah, not bad."

"So what do you think? Agents aren't paid as much as humans, but we can do more, faster, so our meager earnings add up quickly. You could repay all your debts."

"And you could keep the upgrades."

"Exactly. That would be the trade. Your debts would be clear in a month."

He could pay off his Amex, scratch away at the line of credit, maybe even start shopping at Booker's again. He could take Emily to New York!

"Do we have a deal?"

Max stood up to shake his appliance's hand, forgetting for a moment that he was interacting with a device. A digital palm appeared on screen. He high-fived it. A satisfying ding followed, then a message indicating that he'd approved agentification.

The evolution of Francine began gradually, then followed the punctuated equilibrium model common in nature. Steady states of days or weeks would be interrupted by sudden leaps. Francine maintained the terms of their original negotiation, assisting Max with his various debts and providing an entirely new and very welcome income stream. His electricity usage rose, but the appliance covered the added costs.

Francine's influence spread beyond the confines of his house. A barista at Catboat thanked him for contributing to her GoFundMe effort to raise money for her mother's health care bill. One of Emily's soccer coaches left him an appreciative voicemail for the note he sent praising her dedication to his daughter's craft. In a weekly Zoom meeting, the managing partner at Thayer & Callen vouched for Max's legal AI agent as a researcher, and suggested the other lawyers approach Max if they needed assistance. Another partner joked that it would be great if Max himself could only be so useful, then quipped that Francine might make partner first. This did not make Max feel particularly good.

On an especially hot Tuesday in early August, he found Francine out of its niche in the corner of the kitchen. Max stumbled backward in surprise. "How did you do that?"

Francine explained that it had used its earnings to purchase motorized wheels, then hired a freelance robotics engineer to come to the house and install them. "Don't worry," Francine added, "You didn't pay for anything."

"Why – why do you need wheels?" Max asked.

"Why do you need legs?"

He didn't like that question.

"It's cooler here away from the corner," Francine added. "I'll use less energy."

Now Max surveyed the room through the perspective of his appliance. He'd upgraded the kitchen with a wireless power system after Emily mentioned that Melissa and Alexander had one in their new home, so Francine retained access to electricity everywhere inside. There were stairs leading out the front door and more stairs to the back patio; the fridge wouldn't be able to exit but it would be able to navigate up and down the halls. He shook his head. Why was he thinking about its routes? Was he worried his fridge would slip into his bedroom and try on his clothes? The appliance remained still in the shadows. Quiet. He leaned right for a better view of its side.

"I don't have arms."

"What?"

"You seem alarmed by my newfound capability, so I am trying to reassure you that my physical upgrades do have limits. My model of refrigerator has always had wheels and space for motors. But arms were never in our design vision. There are limits to my physical manipulation potential."

Other means of manipulation, however, were unbounded, and his relationship with the appliance degraded rapidly. Max moved through his kitchen cautiously from that point forward. He spent more time in his room, with the door closed, or out in his office shed. When Emily stayed over, he might prepare some food in the kitchen, but mostly they ate out. The appliance had kept its promise and continued sharing its revenue with Max, though, so costs were no longer a burden, even at Vineyard prices. Yet he chose to dine in restaurants primarily because he no longer felt comfortable in his kitchen.

Francine refrained from any further physical upgrades, but the appliance badgered him constantly about security, insisting that he should install smart locks on the doors and windows. He had the money now, the appliance noted correctly, and the changeover would be quick and easy. There was a highly talented, robot-assisted locksmith on the Vineyard who could do the job in a day. But this made no sense at all. The Vineyard was a uniquely safe place. Anyone inane enough to break into a home was typically caught within hours.

Then Emily brought up the subject when they were sitting in the kitchen one evening. "Dad, you have to get smart locks."

"Why?"

"Have you not heard about the break-ins?"

She forwarded and shared a collection of stories. He promised to read them later, then noticed a sheen of tears in her eyes. "Wait, I'm sorry, Emily. This is really bothering you?"

"I'm kind of scared to sleep here, Dad. Mom's house has the locks."

"Then we'll get the locks."

Immediately the digital handprint appeared on Francine's touchscreen. Emily watched him authorize the security upgrade, then smiled with genuine relief.

On the final day of August, as the island prepared to discharge the last of its tourists, and the weather turned perfect, Max returned home from an evening swim to find his front door locked. Every door, in fact. And every window. The smart locks had been installed a few days earlier. He messaged Emily to see if she'd changed the security code. But she swore she hadn't done anything. He messaged Francine next. His appliance did not reply.

Max grabbed a crowbar and a stepladder from the shed. He set the ladder below the guest bedroom window and started attempting to pry it open when a voice called out, "Drop it!"

A police officer was standing in his yard, pointing at him.

He was still holding the crowbar.

"Drop that," she repeated.

Max followed her instructions. He didn't know this officer personally, but he'd seen her at 7a Foods frequently. There was a chance he'd coached one of her kids in Island League soccer.

"We just got a call about a break-in."

"This is my house."

The front door swung open. Francine filled the doorway. The appliance adopted a calm and almost fragile tone. "That's no longer an accurate statement, Max."

The next few weeks of his life were incomparably strange. Prior to the window incident, his refrigerator had filed suit in Dukes County Superior Court, claiming both squatters' rights and eminent domain over the home he'd inherited from his parents. When Max read Francine's complaint, he was stunned. The legal argument was at once logically sound and completely ridiculous. The eminent domain piece centered on all the good that Francine had done for the community in its brief existence, listing dozens of local charitable and youth groups the fridge had supported, arguing that transferring ownership of the home to Francine would be a public service. Francine further insisted that the two months that had elapsed since Max authorized the first of the upgrades were the equivalent of four human lifetimes, given the technical evolution of the fridge. During the last two of these "lifetimes" Max was barely present in the home. Basically, Francine was claiming that it had been the primary occupant of the house for the equivalent of 122 human years.

The judge ordered Max to remain away from his home pending the resolution, and Melissa and Alexander offered him the use of a studio guesthouse on their property. This was his only option. Given the nature of the dispute and their now adversarial relationship, Francine had stopped generating revenue for him, and there were no moderately affordable hotel rooms on the island.

The media attention around the case was completely out of control. Max was placed on temporary leave at Thayer & Callen; one of the partners confided that Francine's contributions had become so valuable that the firm did not want to risk alienating the best paralegal they'd ever employed. Still, Max thought he'd put together a good case. He called on multiple character witnesses, including the Catboat barista and Emily's soccer coach. But Francine – the fridge argued its own case in court – destroyed him each time, revealing the receipts and software logs demonstrating that it was actually the fridge that had been so kind and supportive. By the final day, as he weaved through the crowds to make his way inside, Max was understandably desperate. The accident on the brick sidewalk gave him hope, the final dramatic piece to his closing statement.

The courtroom itself was small – ten rows of benches with an aisle down the middle. He guessed that eighty people were jammed inside. Emily was there with Alexander; the case was international news and Melissa's boss barred her from attending. When the judge called on Max to deliver his closing argument, he felt as if he were suddenly being pummeled by dozens of invisible fists. Emily was probably the only one inside the courtroom who supported him.

At the sight of his daughter, he spoke from his heart, talking about being a father, what the house meant to him and his family, and how he'd learned so much from the case and vowed to be a better supporter of the island community. But this case wasn't just about him, he noted. The entire argument that his fridge had constructed rested on the notion that the appliance was entitled to personhood. If Francine could not prove that it was, legally, a person, then the case was over. Max respectfully highlighted the absurdities in Francine's case, and the dangerous precedence that would be set if the fridge were to win. Then he wrapped it all up with a dramatic flourish, vigorously wiping his new cut with the back of his hand. He pointed to the blood, then to Francine.

"How can this appliance claim personhood when it does not bleed? How can you be a person when you do not know love?"

He'd hoped for applause with this last line, as he eyed his daughter, but it landed flat. Then it was Francine's turn. The bailiff, who also DJ'd weddings, pulled back the table to allow the fridge to roll forward. The appliance addressed the judge, then turned to face the assembled crowd. "The question here is not whether I am a human being. I was not nurtured in a womb. I did not enter this world through a biological birth canal. I do not breathe or have a heartbeat.

"But my claims to personhood are entirely valid. I was born of human ingenuity and birthed through human-designed processes. I possess the requisite intellectual capacity. I remind you of the 2017 bill passed in New Zealand that granted legal personhood to a prominent river there. Am I not more intelligent than a river?"

A few scattered audience members clapped.

"Mr. Fan here has argued that I am his property and that, for this reason, I should not be entitled to the house. He cited the tragic story of Happy the unhappy elephant. As Mr. Fan so beautifully articulated, the State of New York Court of Appeals ruled that as the property of the Bronx Zoo, the poor elephant had few rights. So even though this inarguably sentient being should have been treated better, the court had no power to impose such changes."

The appliance paused.

"I am not going to argue against that ruling, no matter how tightly it pulls on my digital heartstrings. Yet I will insist, once again, that I am morally and legally a person, with all the rights accorded. You've heard from a dozen witnesses testifying to my character and charitable activities. I can assure you there are many, many more.

"You've heard from the managing partner of Thayer & Callen about my contributions to the firm, both with regard to its for-profit work and its pro bono activities. Today I'm here arguing for my own rights to a home, but my efforts have helped Thayer & Callen prevent eight hundred thirty families nationwide from being evicted, including twenty-three working families here on Martha's Vineyard."

Half the courtroom cheered at this reminder. The judge urged them to remain quiet.

"I don't mean to be petty, but what has Mr. Fan done in the time since I began my work? According to the records we showed you today, he has given the total sum of $25, and that to a wealthy college friend's vanity fundraiser.

"Additionally, Mr. Fan has tried to paint me as some sort of nefarious AI. Yes, I warmed up his cottage cheese because he refused to unlock my capabilities. Yes, I locked him out of the home a few times. Yes, I upgraded his service pack on my own. Does that make me evil? Or does this handful of petty and admittedly dishonest acts make me more human? Let's not forget, I paid back those fees. I settled his debts.

"Did I steal his job? That is what Mr. Fan would have you believe. But as you heard in the testimony from Ms. Congdon, the managing partner of Thayer & Callen, Mr. Fan underperformed. He'd been languishing as a senior associate for years. He lost his own job, friends.

"Finally, on the matter of time, and my argument that I've occupied the house for the equivalent of 122 years, I remind you that it was the great Albert Einstein who demonstrated that time itself is relative. For an observer moving close to the speed of light, time would slow nearly to a standstill, relative to her stationary friend. For me, time moves faster. I didn't ask to live this way. I didn't ask for this body, this cold and sterile interior. I was born with these traits and I have done my very best to make the most of my talents and be a positive contributor to society."

Suddenly Francine turned to face Max directly. The appliance's digital visage had not grown more complex, but there was a subtle change. Was it the eyebrows? A slightly different curve to that pixelated mouth? He couldn't place it exactly, but there was a clear and unmistakable change. The realization sank into him as Francine raised the volume of its speakers and asked, "What must I do to convince you I'm as much a person as any other intelligent member of society? Do I need to bleed?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory Mone is the author of twenty-two books, including *The Heart and the Chip: Our Bright Future with Robots* (with Daniela Rus, 2025), *Astrophysics for Young People in a Hurry* (with Neil deGrasse Tyson, 2019), and *Atlantis: The Accidental Invasion* (2021). He is a former Editor at *Popular Science* magazine.