
STORIES OF FRIENDSHIP, COURAGE, AND HOW EVEN A LITTLE ROBOT CAN CHANGE THE WORLD
A LITTLE ROBOT HUGH
HIS STORIES AND ADVENTURES
GRANDPA'S WORKSHOP
NEW FRIENDS
GREAT ADVENTURES
KINDNESS
ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES
RADIM KAUFMANN

Hugh: A Little Robot

His Stories and Adventures

RADIM KAUFMANN

Preview of the first four chapters

Forthcoming American English edition

Maple Creek and Lumina are fictional places
in the American world of this story.

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The First Question


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CHAPTER 01

Hugh Is Left Alone

The Workshop Where the Light Stayed On Late

At the edge of a small town stood an old house with a workshop. It was neither large nor modern. One roof tile had been crooked for so long that even the birds had grown used to it and built their nests beside it. The stucco was chipped in places. The gate squeaked. But inside there was always warmth, light, and the quiet hum of tools. A little robot named Hugh lived there with his grandpa—an old robot repairman.
Grandpa had built Hugh himself, long ago. He had taught him to read, to think, to help people, and never to give up when something went wrong.

"Never give up," he used to say, pushing his glasses onto his forehead. "And if you do happen to give up, at least do it slowly. Things usually sort themselves out in the meantime."



Every evening they repaired broken toys, little robots, or household appliances together. People brought all sorts of things to the workshop. Alarm clocks that rang an hour early. Vacuum cleaners that blew instead of sucking. Once, Jack Turner brought in a robotic lawn mower that had learned to cut only one half of his yard and noisily ignore the other.

“That one has a personality,” Grandpa said with approval. “You don’t fix that. You persuade it.”

And he did persuade it. It took four days. On the particular evening in question, a small stuffed puppy with wheels instead of paws lay on the workbench. It belonged to a little girl named Bára, and it had stopped barking. Hugh stood over it, frowning with his eyes. The fixed line on his face did not move, but the blue light in his lenses dimmed, and he tilted his head so that Grandpa could hardly miss the frown.

“Grandpa, I don’t understand,” he said. “I checked the battery. I checked the speaker. I checked the wires. Everything is fine. And it won’t bark.”

“Ah,” said Grandpa, without even looking up from his cup of tea. “And did you check whether it wants to bark?”

Hugh turned around. “Grandpa. It’s a toy.”

“It’s a toy that has belonged to one little girl for three whole years,” Grandpa said. “Toys like that tend to have opinions.”

Hugh was quiet for a moment. Then he bent over the stuffed puppy again and whispered very softly, so Grandpa would not hear:

“Please bark.”

The puppy did not bark. Grandpa, however, laughed so hard that he started coughing and had to wipe his eyes.

“I heard that, Hugh.”

“I know,” Hugh said with dignity. “I hoped it heard me too.”

In the end, it turned out that a cookie crumb had found its way into the speaker. Just one. A tiny one. It lay there as if it were tucked up in bed. Hugh pulled it out with tweezers, and the puppy barked twice, then once more, as though it wanted the last word.

“You see?” Grandpa said contentedly. “You persuaded it.”

“I pulled a cookie crumb out of it.”

“That’s one form of persuasion.”

When the puppy was finished, Hugh put it on the shelf with the other repaired things whose owners would collect them tomorrow. There were seven things altogether. Grandpa called it *the shelf of happy endings*. Then Grandpa got up, came over to Hugh, and did what he did every evening.

“The most important part isn’t made of metal. It’s hidden right here.”

He tapped Hugh gently on the chest. Right on the blue letter H he had put there himself when he built the robot. Each time, Hugh looked down at his white chest panel. Underneath it were only a cooling system, cables, and a few electronic modules. At least, that was what he had always

thought. And each time, he thought he did not quite understand. And each time, it felt good.

“Good night, Hugh.”

“Good night, Grandpa.”

The light in the workshop went out at eleven fourteen.

The Morning With No Sound

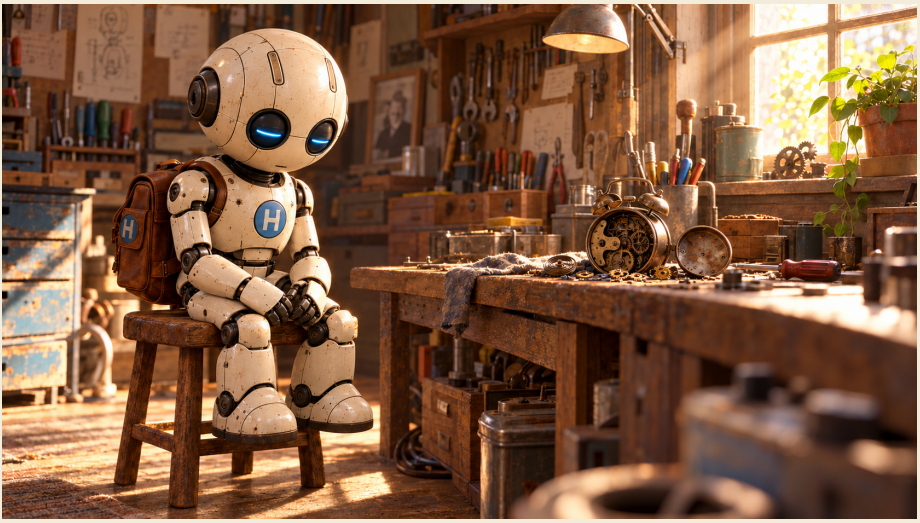
Every morning Hugh woke to sounds. First, the bedroom floor creaked. Then the bathroom faucet wailed, because that faucet had always wailed, and Grandpa said that if he fixed it, the house would take offense. Then a spoon clinked against a mug. And finally came Grandpa’s grumble, which meant *good morning*, even though it sounded nothing like it. That morning, there was silence.

Hugh waited a little. The silence continued. He looked at the clock. It was seven thirty-two. Grandpa never got up after seven.

“Grandpa?”

No one answered. Hugh went upstairs. He walked carefully, trying not to make a noise, because if Grandpa was asleep, it would be a shame to wake him. That was exactly how he arranged it in his mind at that moment, because it was the best of all the possibilities, and he wanted to keep it for as long as he could. Grandpa lay in bed. He looked peaceful. He looked as if he were dreaming of something nice.

But he never woke up again.



Hugh sat beside Grandpa's workbench for a long time. He checked the instruments. He measured the voltage. He searched for a fault. He checked three times. Then once more. Then he told himself that perhaps something was wrong with his procedure, and checked a fifth time. But he knew very well that this time there was no repair. Margaret Green came over from next door. People from town came and spoke quietly, and someone made tea in Grandpa's kitchen, and Hugh opened doors for them and took their coats and offered them chairs, because those were the only things he knew how to do with his hands.

Someone put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Hugh, you're so brave."

Hugh did not answer. He did not feel brave. He felt like a machine from which someone had removed a part, and it still worked, still walked, still opened doors—only the whole thing was tilting strangely. By the time everyone had gone, it was evening. The house was suddenly enormous and empty. Hugh switched on the workshop lamp, as he did every evening. He took an unfinished repair down from the shelf. He sat on his stool. He picked up a screwdriver.

And waited.

He waited for what always came. For Grandpa's quiet voice somewhere behind him, saying, "Good work, Hugh."

No one said it. Hugh put down the screwdriver. Then he picked it up again. Then he put it down once more. At last he switched off the light. It was nine oh six, which was two hours and eight minutes earlier than usual.

A Hundred Things That Cannot Be Fixed

Several days passed. Hugh invented a system. He was good at systems. First thing in the morning, he cleaned. For the rest of the morning, he repaired things. In the afternoon, he cleaned again, even though there was nothing left to clean. In the evening, he sat at the workbench and made lists. A list of tools. A list of spare parts. A list of things to repair. A list of things that did not need repairing but might break, so it was better to check them in advance.

That last list was the longest. Hugh did not notice until the fourth day, when he had a hundred and fourteen items on the page, and one of them was *check back door handle (working)*. One by one, people collected all seven things from the shelf of happy endings. Bára came for the stuffed puppy, and Hugh explained that next time she should not feed it cookies.

"I didn't feed him," Bára said. "He took it himself."

"Oh," Hugh said. "Then I'm sorry."

Bára looked at him for a moment. Then she said, "You're on your own now, aren't you?"

Hugh did not know how to lie. He had not been built for it.

"Yes."

Bára nodded as if that were something she understood. Then she left, and Hugh closed the door behind her, and the shelf of happy endings was empty, and no one put anything on it anymore. The days passed, and Hugh noticed something strange. The workshop was clean. The tools were in order. Everything worked as it should. And that was exactly what was wrong.

The workshop had never been clean. There had always been a half-dismantled vacuum cleaner, or three-quarters of an alarm clock, or screws that Grandpa had spilled and left where they were, because "screws scatter and then get together again. That's their business."

Now nothing scattered. Nothing spilled. Nothing wailed. The bathroom faucet had stopped wailing on the third day. Hugh had fixed it because he did not know what else to do. When he realized this, he sat on his stool for a very long time. And he understood that if he stayed alone, his world would stay silent forever.



On the sixth day, he opened Grandpa's old toolbox. He was not looking for anything. He only wanted to dust it, because he could not think of an-

other task. Beneath the top tray, among the screwdrivers, lay a photograph. It had yellowed, and one corner was bent. In it, a young man in overalls grinned at the camera, holding a gear the size of a dinner plate. A city rose behind him. Towers, bridges, lights—things Hugh knew only from stories.

Hugh turned the photograph over. On the back, in Grandpa's handwriting, was a single word: *Beginning*. Beside the photograph lay a small brass screw. Ordinary. A little worn. It did not fit any machine Hugh had ever repaired. He picked it up. And he remembered one of Grandpa's last pieces of advice. It had been a week earlier, over their evening tea, when Grandpa no longer said very much. He had said it casually, as if he were talking about the weather:

"In the city, you'll find plenty of people who'll need a friend one day. And perhaps you'll discover that you need them too."

Hugh had not understood then. Now he sat in the quiet workshop, holding a photograph with the word *Beginning* on it, and understood exactly.

A Backpack, a Photograph, and a Brass Screw

The next morning, Hugh packed his little backpack. It took him a while to decide. Not because of courage—because of tools. A robot who knows how to repair things wants to take everything. First Hugh packed twenty-nine tools, then he lifted the backpack, then he put it down again, then he took out the vise and told himself that there was bound to be a vise somewhere in the city.



In the end, he took only a few tools. Combination pliers. A set of screwdrivers. A wrench Grandpa called *universal*, because it fit almost nothing, but fit almost nothing very reliably. A roll of electrical tape. A small flashlight. And two things that were not tools. Grandpa's old photograph, which he slipped into an inner pocket so it would not get any more bent than it already was. And the little brass screw, as a keepsake. He left it in Grandpa's shallow box, placed the box in a small inner pocket, and checked the fastener three times, just to be sure.

Then he looked around the workshop. The shelf of happy endings was empty. The workbench was tidy. Seventeen screwdrivers lay in a row, arranged by size, and not one of them had scattered.

"I'll come back," Hugh said aloud.

He did not say it to the workshop. Or to Grandpa. He said it more to himself, because sentences like that are said aloud so they are easier to believe. He paused and straightened his shoulders. Robots do not need to breathe. But Hugh knew the pause Grandpa took before every difficult repair. Now he copied it. Not for air. For the courage to take the next step.

He switched off the lamp above the workbench. Then he went to the door and flipped the main switch down. It clicked, and everything in the workshop went dark—the indicators on the charger, the LED on the welder, and the little green light in the corner that Hugh had never discovered the purpose of. The workshop fell silent in a way only it knew how. He stepped outside. He closed the workshop door.

The handle clicked. The lock caught. The gate at the end of the garden squeaked exactly as it always had. Ahead of him, a dirt road stretched between meadows full of daisies, and far away on the horizon, the towers of a great city gleamed. Tiny dots of drones circled above them. It looked enormous. It looked beautiful. It looked like something that had no room at all for a little service robot the size of an eight-year-old boy.

Hugh shifted the backpack on his shoulders. And set off for the great city to find new friends. He counted his steps. One. Two. Three. At twenty-seven, he turned—just once, just to look, because that is simply what you do before a long journey. The workshop stood dark among the trees, small and quiet. The window was black glass. No lamp. No light. Nothing.

Hugh looked at it for exactly as long as you look at something once. Then he turned back. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. He did not stop there again. If he kept looking at the closed door, the next step would only get harder. He walked on until the workshop window disappeared among the branches. Behind him, in the workshop he could no longer see, a lamp came on in the window.

It did not flicker. A warm, steady light appeared in the empty workshop, even though the main switch was still off. No one was there to see it. Hugh was already farther along the road, and he did not look back. At the time, he knew nothing about that light. He kept walking, past the last

fence post, past the sign marking the edge of town, and somewhere along that stretch of road, he opened a new list.

At the top, he wrote a single word.

QUESTIONS.

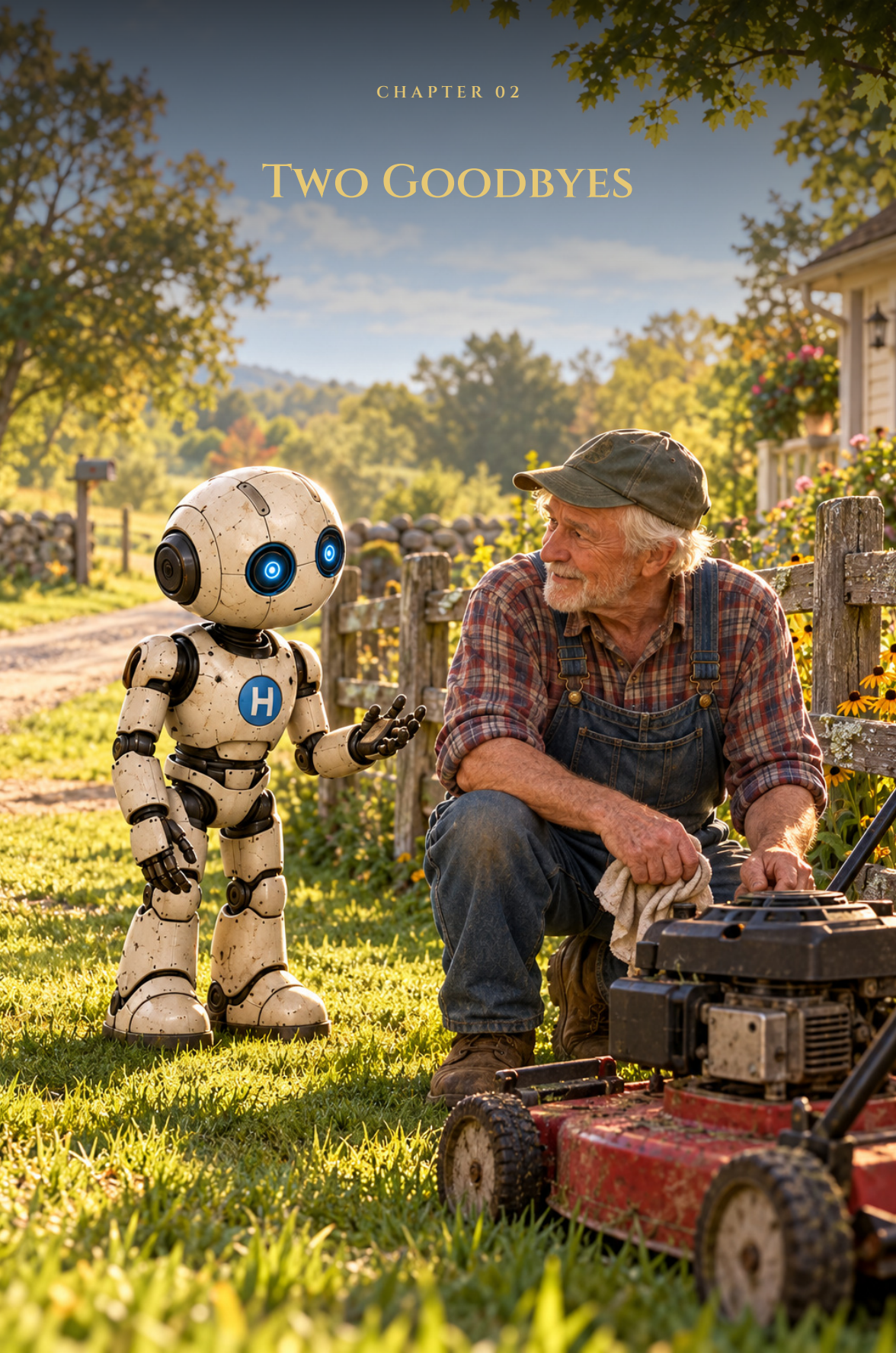
The first item:

Where do I belong?

It was, he thought, a pretty good place to start.

CHAPTER 02

Two Goodbyes



CHAPTER 02

Two Goodbyes

The road out of Maple Creek runs past the last few houses before it becomes nothing but a road between meadows. And right there, among those last few houses, just behind a fence, lives Jack Turner with the lawn mower he has been fighting for twenty years, in a war neither of them can win. Hugh heard him before he saw him.

"You little monster," Jack was telling the mower, kneeling beside it in the grass with his cap pushed far back. "Not cutting again. Again. Just like yesterday."

The mower said nothing, because mowers generally say nothing, but Jack spoke to it as though this were a lapse in manners on its part that called for an explanation. Then he looked up and saw Hugh with his backpack.

"Hugh!" He straightened, wiping one hand on his pants. "Where are you headed so early?"

Hugh stopped. It was a simple question, and he wanted to give a simple answer, because that was the only kind he had just then.

"Away," he said.

"Away away, or just away for a while?"

Hugh thought about it. "I don't know how long."

"Ah." Jack nodded as though this were a perfectly ordinary answer he heard all the time. "Well, take care of yourself. And tell your grandpa I've almost got this mower figured out. Almost."

Hugh lowered his head. “Grandpa died,” he said quietly.

Jack took his hand off the motor. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” For a moment, the only sound between them was the grass rustling in the wind.

“See you, Hugh.”

“See you,” Hugh said, and it was a strange thing to say. He was not certain it was true. But not being certain is not the same as lying, so he said it and let it stand.

Jack stayed by the fence a little longer. Then he went slowly back to the mower. Hugh walked on, thinking about how an ordinary morning could be beginning for one person while, for another, everything had changed.

A little farther on, where the gardens ended and the road began to narrow, Margaret Green was waiting by her gate. She was not waiting by chance. Margaret Green never did anything by chance—that was the first thing you noticed about her, and also the last.

“You didn’t stop for breakfast,” she said before Hugh could say hello.

“I don’t need breakfast.”

“That’s not what I asked.” She handed him a small paper parcel, and Hugh took it because refusing would take longer than accepting, which was true of almost everything Margaret Green did.



For a moment, she studied him over her glasses—the way she looked at books she was not sure had been placed on the right shelf.

“Where are you going?” she asked, although almost everyone in town knew where.

“To Lumina.”

“I know that. I asked where.” She tapped her temple with two fingers—a gesture she made when she wanted people to really listen. “Where you’re going.”

Hugh thought about it seriously, not just politely. “I don’t know.”

“Then find out.” She nodded as though that settled the matter, as simple as a recipe from her kitchen.

“How will I know when I’ve found out?”

“That’s the harder part.” She said it without pity, simply as a fact—in the tone she had used for forty years at the library, explaining where people could find what they were looking for, even when what they were looking for was not always exactly on the shelf where they had put it.

"Go," she added. "There's still a good stretch of road before dark."

Hugh turned to leave.

"Hugh."

He stopped. Margaret Green took off her glasses—which she did only when she wanted to be understood exactly—and said:

"Goodbye."

Not "see you." Not "see you soon." Just goodbye, as direct and as clear as only she could make it.

At that moment, Hugh felt the difference, though he could not name it—the difference between Jack's farewell and hers. He did not know why. He knew only that sometimes one word is longer than a whole sentence, and this was exactly such a case. Margaret put her glasses back on and turned toward her door without waiting for Hugh to leave first—because Margaret Green never let people know she was watching them, even though she always was.

Hugh walked on. The road stretched ahead between the meadows. In one hand he carried a paper parcel he did not need, and in his mind, two sentences from two different people—and for the whole next stretch of road, he wondered why the shorter one weighed more.

CHAPTER 03

What Hugh Carried



CHAPTER 03

What Hugh Carried

Maple Creek thinned behind Hugh slowly. First the houses disappeared. Then the fences. Then the last mailbox, leaning toward the road as if it wanted to read the address on his backpack. What remained were meadows, low stone walls, and a road stretching so far ahead that the sky seemed to hold it between two fingers. Hugh walked at a steady pace. Left, right. Left, right.

After a hundred and seventy-three steps, he noticed that his backpack was pulling harder on the left. Eleven steps later, the pull grew stronger. Three steps after that, Hugh stopped. If Grandpa had been beside him, he probably would have said that some problems begin by pretending to be small, then turn into an inconvenience, and finally become a bill. Hugh did not know who might send him a bill out here between the meadows, but he knew Grandpa had usually been right about such things.

A low boundary stone stood beside the road. Moss covered most of it, and only half of a carved letter M remained visible on its face. Hugh took off his backpack, set it on the stone, and opened the buckles.

“First, determine the actual condition,” he said aloud.

The wind in the grass did not answer, but it sounded a little like the brush Grandpa had used to sweep metal filings from the workbench. Hugh took everything out. Three screwdrivers. Two flathead, one Phillips. Two small adjustable wrenches, a torque adapter, and a thin feeler gauge. Pliers with blue handles. A spool of copper wire. A roll of electrical tape, partly used

but still good. Four spare power cells, one of them nearly dead. A bottle of machine oil. A soft cloth. A folding ruler. Two bags of ordinary screws, each carefully labeled. These were all ordinary tools and supplies; the unusual brass part stayed separate in Grandpa's little box.

He also found a bent key from a cabinet that no longer existed and a small fuse with a blackened filament. Last, he took out Margaret Green's paper parcel. From the side pocket, he added the flashlight and carefully laid Grandpa's photograph at the edge of the stone; those he intended to keep without any more sorting. He left the small coins in a separate pocket. He arranged everything in a line across the flat stone. Useful things on the right. Useless things on the left. At first, it seemed simple.

Screwdrivers to the right. Pliers to the right. Dead power cell to the left. Bent key to the left. The paper parcel... Hugh held it in both hands. He could feel two slices of bread with something between them. He did not need food. Margaret knew that. Margaret Green knew almost everything a person could learn by watching people over a pair of glasses for forty years. So the parcel belonged on the left.

Hugh put it there. Then he picked it up and moved it to the right.

"It has no use for me," he said.

He put it on the left.

"But Margaret knew that."

He returned it to the right. The sorting that was supposed to take two minutes had already taken seven.



Hugh reached into the small inner pocket of the backpack to check whether something heavy remained inside. His fingers touched wood. He pulled out a shallow box without a lid. Grandpa had kept it on the workbench, and the word UNIDENTIFIED had been written in pencil along one side. The writing had nearly faded away. Inside the box lay a single brass screw. It was not large. It was not especially shiny. Its thread was finer than that of any screw Hugh carried, and one side of its head was slightly uneven, as if someone had shaped it by hand.

Hugh had once tried to sort it into Grandpa's drawers.

"Metric?" he had asked.

"No."

"Imperial?"

"Not that either."

"Then what is it for?"

Grandpa had pushed his glasses onto his forehead, held the screw up to the light, and examined it for a long time.

“I don’t know exactly where I’ll put it yet.”

It was shortly after Hugh had been built, eight years ago, and some answers had frustrated him more than broken machines did.

“If you don’t know where you’ll put it, why are you keeping it?”

Grandpa had placed the screw back in the box.

“Because not knowing is not the same as not needing.”

Now Hugh set the box in the middle of the stone. It was neither on the right nor on the left. He measured the screw with the folding ruler. He examined the thread through his optical magnifier. He tried it against every nut in both bags. It fit none of them.

“Function undetermined,” he announced.

That should have been enough. Hugh put the rejected items in an empty bag of their own. He would not leave the dead power cell, the damaged fuse, or the old key here. He would put them in the proper collection bins when he found some. He returned the useful things to the backpack, distributing their weight evenly this time. He placed the paper parcel on top so it would not get crushed. He left the brass screw on the stone. He fastened the first buckle. Then the second. He put on the backpack and took one step toward Lumina.

The backpack no longer pulled to the left. He took a second step. Everything inside was balanced correctly. He took a third step. He stopped. The road ahead of him was empty. So was the road behind him. A tiny brass dot rested on the boundary stone, too small for anyone to see from a distance. Hugh went back.

“You are not a spare part,” he told the screw.

It sounded ridiculous. A screw was not something that needed an explanation. Even so, Hugh opened the small inner pocket of his backpack, took out both bags of ordinary screws, and moved them somewhere else. He placed the box with the brass screw inside the pocket by itself. He did not know what it was for. He knew only whose hands had once placed it in a tray marked UNIDENTIFIED. He did not put it on the right with the useful things.

He did not put it on the left with the things to be discarded. He made a third category for it. Things he did not understand yet. As he closed the backpack again, a crow gave a short caw from the grass. It sat on the wall, tilting its head first toward Hugh and then toward the paper parcel that rested on top of the tools.

"That is not for me," Hugh said.

The crow tilted its head the other way.

"Which does not mean it is useless."

He unwrapped the paper. Inside was bread with cheese and a thin layer of mustard. Margaret had also included a red apple, although it barely fit in the parcel. Hugh broke one slice of bread into small pieces and placed them in the grass away from the road. The crow flew down from the wall but kept a safe distance. Hugh stepped back. The crow hopped closer.

"You can just take a look," Hugh said.

The crow looked. Then it grabbed the largest piece of cheese and flew to a branch. Hugh wrapped the remaining food again. Perhaps he would meet someone else who needed it. That possibility was enough to place the parcel on the right. Before returning to the road, he took out his notebook. There was a single question on the first page:

Where do I belong?

Beneath it, he wrote a second:

Does everything need a purpose to matter?

He watched the two sentences for a while. The second looked longer than it had when it existed only in his mind. He closed the notebook. The road climbed gently away from the boundary stone. Hugh reached the top of the hill and turned around for the last time. He could no longer see Maple Creek. He could not see the workshop roof, the crooked tile, or the old lamp in the window. There was only a band of trees beneath the pale sky. He did not know whether someone beyond those trees was looking in the same direction. He did not know whether he would ever return. He did not know whether he had chosen the right things for his backpack.

This time, he did not try to correct his not knowing. He simply adjusted both straps to the same height on his shoulders and continued. The day slowly leaned toward evening. The road was longer than it had looked on the map, and Lumina was still nowhere in sight. Hugh kept walking. In his backpack, he carried tools for problems he knew how to name, food for someone he had not met yet, and one screw that did not fit anything at all.

For the first time, he wondered whether he was carrying more than things. Perhaps some of them were carrying him.

CHAPTER 04

The Road to Lumina



CHAPTER 04

The Road to Lumina

Hugh walked until the light was gone. The road changed after dark. In daylight, it had edges, a color, and small cracks where grass grew. At night, all that remained was a paler strip between two dark fields. Hugh could see in the dark better than a human, but even his optical lenses could not find something that was not in front of him. Maple Creek was no longer behind him. Lumina was not yet ahead. He had only the road, and in the beam of his light it appeared a few meters at a time, as though someone were building it just as he reached it.

For hours, he counted his steps. At first, it was comforting. Every step had a number, every number followed another, and none of them could get lost. When he reached ten thousand, he opened a new sequence in his memory. When he reached twenty thousand, he adjusted his stride by two millimeters because the right strap of his backpack had loosened slightly as he walked. When he reached thirty thousand, he calculated that, if the map was telling the truth and his pace did not change, he should reach the ridge above Lumina shortly after noon the next day.

The map was telling the truth. It just did not tell him everything. It did not tell him, for example, that before every hill, the road looked as though this particular hill would be the last. It did not tell him that cold seeped into metal joints more slowly than into human hands but stayed there longer. It did not tell him that dust from the road found its way between the segments of his boots even when their seals were working properly. And it certainly did not tell him that thirty thousand steps without a sin-

gle familiar voice took longer than thirty thousand steps beside someone who occasionally remarked that you were going too fast, too slowly, or entirely the wrong way.

Grandpa could say all three things on a single walk. Hugh stopped counting halfway through the number thirty-four thousand two hundred sixteen. Not because he had forgotten it. He stored it precisely. He simply no longer knew what the next number would tell him that the last one had not. Clouds gathered over the fields. First they covered one star, then another, and finally the whole sky. The wind brought the smell of wet earth a few minutes before the first raindrop. It landed on Hugh's left lens, slid down the white casing of his face, and hung from the fixed line of his mouth.

"Rain," Hugh announced.

No one thanked him for the warning. Then the sky opened. Water drummed on his head, ran down his shoulders, and darkened the leather of his backpack. Hugh tightened the straps and checked the seals at his neck, elbows, and wrists. Everything was within acceptable limits. Rain posed no immediate danger to him, provided he did not stand in deep water for too long and lightning did not strike him directly, which was a condition he did not find precise enough on his travel map.

An indicator lit up at the edge of his field of vision.

ENERGY: 41 PERCENT.

Hugh enlarged the reading. Before leaving, he had planned to keep going through the night until he reached thirty percent, then switch to low-power mode. Grandpa had taught him to keep a reserve for malfunctions, bad weather, and errors in estimation. Now he had all three, although the last was his own, and he did not like including it in the calculation.

In the darkness to his right, he noticed the straight edge of a roof. A small wooden shelter stood beside the road. It had a bench, a rusty timetable for a bus route that had stopped running long ago, and an emergency light beneath the roof. The light was out. On a post beside the bench was an outlet for older service units, but its connector had three narrow contacts, while Hugh's charging cable had two wide ones. He ducked under the roof just as the rain became a solid wall.

First Hugh examined the outlet. Then the cable. Then the outlet again, because a second look sometimes reveals a fault that does not yet know it has been discovered. He had no adapter. He could make one. He had copper wire, electrical tape, and tools. But he had no voltage specifications, and no assurance that the wiring behind the outlet had survived the years undamaged. Connecting blindly would not be a repair. It would be a gamble, and Grandpa said gambles were calculations someone had refused to finish.

Hugh closed the outlet. Above it hung the broken emergency light. One of its mounting screws had worked loose, so with every gust of wind the light tapped softly against the wood. Hugh opened his backpack, spread the cloth on the bench, and took out two ordinary screws he had kept. The first had too coarse a thread. The second was too short. In a separate pocket lay the shallow box marked UNIDENTIFIED.

Hugh placed his fingers on its edge. The single brass screw was about the right length. Its head would fit into the recess in the bracket. Its thread might be fine enough to catch the old nut, if Hugh modified the nut a little. If. Suppose. Perhaps. Three words Grandpa had never considered technical specifications. Hugh did not take out the box. He closed the pocket and examined the bracket again. He found that the screw was not actually missing. It was still in the wooden post; it had simply backed out far enough for the collar to slip off. Hugh put the collar back, tightened

the screw, and checked that movement in the roof did not strain the metal.

Then he removed the light's cover. There was no major fault inside. One contact had oxidized, and the spring no longer pressed it against the battery. Hugh cleaned the contact with his cloth, adjusted the spring with his pliers, and replaced the cover. When he pressed the test button, soft yellow light spread beneath the roof. Many names had been carved into the bench. Some had dates, others had hearts, and one had only a long line with no obvious meaning. Hugh knew he could sand the wood and make the bench smooth again. He also knew he would not.

"Always leave a place a little better than you found it," Grandpa used to say.

Until now, Hugh had understood that sentence as an instruction to work. For the first time, he wondered whether it was more an instruction to choose. The emergency light worked. The bracket no longer tapped. The names remained. That was enough. Hugh sat at one end of the bench, leaving room at the other in case someone arrived soaked through. He put the backpack beside his feet and checked whether water had reached the pocket with the screw. It had not.

His energy dropped to thirty-eight percent. He set himself to wake at first light, dimmed his optical lenses, and gradually shut down everything he would not need during the night. Walking diagnostics. Precise timekeeping. The step counter. Listening was the last thing left. Rain drummed on the roof. Wind passed through the grass. Somewhere far away, thunder rumbled. None of those sounds resembled the creaking floor above the workshop or a spoon in Grandpa's mug.

Hugh waited to see whether the silence would feel empty. It did not. It was full of rain. His lenses dimmed to two narrow blue strips. In the

morning, warmth on his right shoulder woke him. The rain had stopped. Sunlight fell across the wet grass, drawing a tiny point of light from every blade. Beneath the shelter, the air smelled of wood and damp earth. The emergency lamp was off because, this time, its light sensor was working properly.

Hugh ran a basic diagnostic.

ENERGY: 36 PERCENT.

DRIVE SYSTEM: NORMAL.

SEALS: NORMAL.

RIGHT ANKLE: FRICTION INCREASED BY 1.8 PERCENT.

He checked the last reading twice. Then he sat down, cleaned the fine dust from the joint, and applied a single drop of oil. The extra friction fell to 0.3 percent. Grandpa would have said it was almost as good as new, then added that almost-new things found the cleverest ways to break. Hugh packed his tools again. Before leaving, he picked up a strip of old packaging that the wind had blown beneath the roof and put it in the trash can on the post. He touched nothing else.



The road climbed. Hugh switched his step counter back on. After eight hundred meters, he stopped watching its readings. He chose a pace that used seven percent less energy, even though it meant arriving later. It was not the pace he had planned in the workshop. There, he had made his calculations on a clean floor, with a full battery and a backpack that had not yet carried rain. Here, he had a wet road, a headwind, and thirty-five percent energy.

The actual conditions mattered more than the original plan. He knew that sentence from Grandpa. But the decision to slow down was his own. Through the morning, the landscape changed around him so slowly that at first he did not notice. The stone walls grew lower and farther apart. The fields grew larger. A power line appeared above the road and followed the same direction as he did for several kilometers. A cargo drone crossed the sky, too high to make out Hugh, leaving only a brief hum behind it.

Later, he passed the first sign marked LUMINA. There had once been a number below the name, but the paint had peeled away. Only the top half of the left-hand digit remained, which might have been a three, an eight,

or a very badly drawn zero. Hugh stopped. His map showed eighteen kilometers from the last junction to the edge of Lumina. According to his original measurements, he had already walked twenty-one. That meant one of three things: the map was old, his estimated stride length was wrong, or he had missed a turn.

He disliked the third possibility most, which was no reason to rule it out. He went back three hundred and twelve meters to a junction he had not paid attention to before. A wooden signpost stood beside the ditch. The wind had turned the sign on its single nail, and the arrow now pointed into a field where there was nothing but wet earth. Hugh gripped the post with both hands, intending to turn the sign so it ran parallel to the main road.

He stopped. The fact that the field was the wrong direction did not prove which of the other two directions was right. Hugh took out his map. He aligned its north with the sun's position and the time. Then he examined the shoulders of the road. On the wider road leading right were tracks from several narrow wheels, fresh after the night's rain. On the road to the left were only tractor tracks, which ended at a gate.

The power line continued above the road to the right. Only then did Hugh loosen the nail, turn the arrow to the right, and secure it with a piece of copper wire so that it could easily be taken down and replaced later. He stepped back a few paces. The sign pointed the same way as the map, the tracks, and the power line. This time, he was not fixing something because it looked crooked. First, he had found out where it belonged.



Hugh's notebook lay on a stone beside the map. He opened it to the first page.

Where do I belong?

Does everything need a purpose to matter?

Beneath the two questions, he added a third:

How do I know what to change and what to leave alone?

He waited to see whether an answer would come. It did not. That was becoming a pattern. He put away the notebook and set off along the right road. By afternoon, the road was wider. First came smoother asphalt, then reflectors on low posts, and finally the first white line. In the distance was a sound that was neither wind nor rain. A quiet, steady hum, made of many motors, wheels, and machines still too far away for Hugh to hear individually.

Lumina was still out of sight. Yet it was already everywhere around the road. The web of overhead wires grew denser. Cargo drones passed more often. Automatic traffic sensors stood along the shoulder, and one turned

to follow Hugh as he walked by. His battery had dropped to twenty-eight percent, but the calculation now showed that, at his new pace, he would reach the edge of the city with a safe reserve. For the first time since Maple Creek, he knew not only where he was going but that he would probably get there.

He adjusted his backpack and continued along the white line. A quick electric whir came from around the bend. Hugh raised his head. There was a crash. Then a long scrape of metal against gravel. And finally, an indignant voice:

"I'm not stuck!"

Hugh stopped.

End of the Preview

Hugh's journey continues.

The complete English edition is in preparation.

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