

Robo-burger

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"Jesus, this guy really destroyed over two-hundred Robo-burgers?" said Detective Davidson, flipping through the file on his PDA. "He's a nobody."

"Yeah," Detective Martinez said with a nod. "Two-hundred and twelve."

Made several attacks on the corporate headquarters, too, assassinated their CFO and put their CEO in the hospital for nine months."

On the other side of the glass, the side that couldn't see the officers was Fred Jackson. He was in his late twenties, a little on the skinny side, wearing a flannel shirt hanging open and untucked over a t-shirt with blue jeans and combat boots. He was pale skinned with brown hair and brown eyes, and was the sort of person you'd forget immediate.

Davidson said, "The only connect is that he worked at a fast food place to '27?"

"And then he got laid off. Yeah. All this because he fucking got laid off."

Which, of course, was not the whole of it. Davidson and Martinez were actually decent, hardworking police officers. They believed in their communities and, largely, their fellow citizens. They knew that the world was changing faster than ever, but by their occupation and disposition they were not inclined to worry at the causes because they were always so focused on the effects.

In 2025, Robo-burger had started up. Its gimmick was that each and every store would be staffed entirely by robots, save for a human manager. The robots were cute, pastel colored in blue and yellow, about five feet high with comic faces. They had arms, of course, and rolled around on four wheels.

When a person went into a Robo-burger, they went up to a booth that was akin to a bank teller and Robo-man, the Robo-burger mascot and an even jauntier version of the floor bots. He'd thank you for coming, and if you'd ever given your name at any Robo-burger, anywhere, he'd give you a personalized greeting, after initially asking if it was okay. It usually was. You'd tell the computer what order you wanted, then you'd verify the order as it flashed up on the screen and pay with either money or credit card. Then the floor bots would whiz around and make your order and deliver it to you. It was similar for drive through.

They bots were always polite. They always got your order right. The food was always properly assembled and perfectly presented. The robots also cleaned the store and never had a fast food chain been so spotless. The floor bots, compared to human operators, were about 1/8th the cost. They were made by General Robotics and cost, with a five year service contract, about \$22,000 each. In terms of efficiency, they could do the work of 1.7 human workers at any given time and they could work 24 hours a day. Every day.

They never took breaks. Never complained about their lousy hours or pay. Never said the word "union". They didn't care about holidays. Never any overtime. And since they could perform routine repairs and maintenance on each other, and every aspect of the store (which, of course, had been designed precisely for this), human intervention was minimal. After the first year of operation, Robo-burger had to let go 80% of its lower

management instead of each store having a human manager, a human manager now oversaw five different stores.

Due to the radical way in which overhead was cut, Robo-burger undercut their competition. What's more, people preferred dealing with the robots. Just like with bank machines, most people just didn't care to deal with a human being, preferring the quite competence of the machines.

In 2026, every fast food franchise knew that it was adapt or be destroyed by the Robo-burger juggernaut. Within two years, every fast food joint in the country – with the exception of one that raised its prices and touted its adherence to human values, but was a small player in the business was run by robots. It was in 2027 that Fred Jackson got fired.

In 2023, Fred Jackson had finished his two year degree as an industrial technologist. He had always liked making things. He wanted to be an engineer. His plan was to get a good job and go to school part time to get his bachelor's in engineering. He came from a poor family and had to work his way through junior college – working fast food, mostly – so the idea of being a factory worker was not something he found particularly daunting. He got a job shortly after graduation in Tennessee where he helped build cars. He met a girl he liked and married her. She believed in him.

In 2026, the factory in Tennessee moved to Mexico. Or China. Or somewhere not Tennessee where he was not welcome. It was tough. He got a job where he had experience. He told himself that fast food would always be around, that he could get to be assistant manager and then climb that ladder. Fast food wasn't going overseas. Americans had to eat in America. But his wife didn't like that. She had married a man with a vision of being an engineer. She found someone who already was an engineer and divorced Fred.

Then came Robo-burger. In 2027, he got laid off. Not just him, of course, *everyone* got laid off. That was over five million people.

In 2028, Fred Jackson was talking to his best and oldest friend, Tim Black.

"I can't find a job, Tim."

"I wish I could get you one, but construction is booked solid. If I didn't know ever foreman in town, I couldn't get work for myself," Tim said, taking another swig of tequila and handing the bottle off to Fred. Fred drank. They were on the side of a road that clung to a ridge overlooking a beautiful valley below them lit by moonlight.

"I got nothing. My parents can barely afford to take care of Bill and Amy. They couldn't afford me back in their lives without a job or prospects. My wife left me for some fucking asshole in a tie. I got no savings, no investments, nothing. I'm not sure how I'm going to eat tomorrow." He drank and passed the bottle.

"We're all worried. I mean, how much longer before those bots come for our jobs? Shit, I just haul things up and nail them in place. Every day you see some special about how robots are doing this job or that job, now. Now, it's the people who clean houses. I heard it in the news. Cleaning bots are cheaper and more efficient than cleaning people. We're all worried, pal. Plus, you know, so long as you got me as a friend, you'll always have a place to crash, food to eat. I'm not going to let my number one hombre be on the street. No fucking way." Drink, pass.

But Fred didn't drink. He looked out at the moonlit valley down below them. He had an epiphany, then. He said, "This just can't work. It can't."

"What can't work?"

"All of this. I dunno. The economy. I mean . . . it can't work. In two years, five million people were fired, replaced by robots. Everyone's scared. Every year those robots are better, able to do more things."

"And the fucked up thing is people would rather deal with the robots."

"Yeah. Me, too."

Tim nodded. It was true. Humans were complex, emotional beings. Whenever you confronted one, you never knew if they would be sunny or surly, happy or sad, competent at their job or sullen and resentful of being forced to do whatever it was they were doing. Robots and computers – they were predictable, polite. It was pointless getting angry at them, but that didn't matter because far more often than human beings they did their jobs as designed.

Tim summed it up, "Robo-burgers are pretty damn tasty."

"But what are folks going to do? I mean, it isn't like the US builds anything, anymore."

"And when those bots get cheaper than the human workers in China it won't matter, anyway. They'll get their asses replaced, too."

"So what are we gonna do?"

"I dunno. Get the humans back in work? That's what we gotta do."

"How do we do that?"

Fred drank from the bottle and handed it back. "We destroy the machines."

Fred could not build something with robotic perfection, but he was smart, and good with his hands. He bombed his first Robo-burger two weeks later. He wasn't close to the blast, and he did everything he could to make sure that no one was hurt (that time, no one was). But he watched as the column of smoke drifted up into the night sky.

It felt good. He felt purged. His skin tingled and he walked on air. Colors were sharp and clear. He felt like he could do anything.

Martinez and Davidson went into the interrogation room.

"Where's my lawyer?" Fred asked. He was chained to a chair that was bolted into the ground.

"Sorry, buddy," Davidson said, "you're a terrorist. You gotta know that. You've been in the news enough. What do they call you? The Roboburglar?"

"The New York Post, yeah," he said.

"You confessed," Martinez said. "Why'd you do that?"

"I'd still like to have a lawyer."

"Tough."

Fred shrugged. "I'm not ashamed of what I did."

"You murdered one person, crippled another, seriously wounded three others, one a fireman," Martinez said. "Done billions of dollars in damage."

"I'm no more ashamed of what I did than Larry Porter," Fred said with a laugh. Larry Porter was the founder of Robo-burger and the world's richest man. "He destroyed the lives of . . . shit, how many millions? No one can really tell. Five million out of work in fast food alone"

"Oh, c'mon! You think getting rid of fast food employment is justification for what you did?" Davidson said, losing his temper a bit. "They were fucking fast food jobs!"

"And the only work that five million fucking people could get!" Fred said back, equally hot, struggling against his bonds. "Do you think that people thought to themselves that after high school what they were really looking forward to was working fast fucking food? Do you think that was anyone's plan? It wasn't. They got those jobs because those were the jobs to get."

Martinez said to her partner, "Calm down, man, calm down."

"What time is it?" Fred asked.

Martinez looked at her watch and said, "About three minutes till ten."

Fred nodded. "But I've got more to say about why I confessed. When I was growing up, it was all about man against the machine, how it was that machines were destroying our lives. Kung-fu against the machines. But the machines aren't the problem, the people are. It doesn't matter how many machines you destroy, unless the people change, nothing changes, because the machines are built by people to do specific things and they do them. It isn't the machine's fault. I'm not attacking machines, I'm attacking the system that put them there. That put profit over human respect and dignity, over human health and well-being."

Davidson said, "That's bullshit. Just terrorist bullshit."

"I was also doing something else."

Martinez, "What?"

"Waiting."

And just while Martinez and Davidson were looking at each other there was an explosion and the ground trembled. The lights flickered and died, except for the emergency light above the door.

In the darkness, Fred Jackson said, "Visual recognition systems are better, now, than human eyesight. The first military bots were put into action in 2005, twenty years ago. Infantry, sniper, commando – for years, now, people have been being phased out of those jobs, too. In Washington, DC, they've replaced 90% of the human security force with light military bots."

Martinez and Davidson had their guns out. They were wondering what was going on, incoherent babble as the backdrop to what Fred was saying.

Davidson said, "What's going to happen, next?"

"That's a good question. You dismissed those five million people who got fired from fast food, or cleaning houses, or whatever. They're outside. They're going to demand, one way or the other, the right to live and prosper. You're going to have to either give them what they want, or kill them. All of them."

"No, no! What's going to happen next, *now*?"

Then the lights flickered and went back on. Fred shrugged. "I guess I'm going to go to prison, somewhere. But the fight is going to go on."