

The New Yorker Fiction Section presents,
KILLER ROBOTS FROM SPACE

Harold Altman was returning home from the general store with his specially-requested *New York Review of Books* tucked under the arm of his patched tweed barn jacket when he found many of his neighbors gathered around the windows of the small town's hardware store. They stood in silence, their weathered Yankee faces expressionless, their eyes fixed on a bank of television screens in the store window.

"The President of the United States has urged calm above all. Please do not attempt to enter the city of New York. Emergency personnel only are – "

Altman cast an eye over the television newscaster, with her single strand of obligatory pearls, her forgettable blouse and too-blonde coiffure, and detected a long-submerged Dixie lilt bubble up from beneath her flat, Mid-Atlantic accent under the strain of her barely concealed terror.

"It is imperative that the residents of New York City stay in their homes."

Altman was glad to have left New York, with its noise and chaos, its slouchy, sullen teenagers and pick-pockets, its shrieking widows and twisted subway cars now filled with steaming goo. He had relinquished gladly his post at Columbia without waiting for the inevitable inquiry and found instead an amiable cottage in the woods, a writer's den situated only a short and meditative stroll from the campus of N, the small liberal arts college where he taught creative writing and a short seminar on Bernard Malamud. Of course, N, too, had its small-minded pedants and nosey ethics committees, but it was easier here for Altman to carve out a space for himself – and he had become something of a local celebrity to the quaint, muddle-headed farmers who toiled most picturesquely in the cranberry bogs nearby.

"We may never know what brought them here," the newscaster said rather melodramatically. "We just may never know."

I cannot abide television, Altman concluded as he headed towards the train station. Better that he should spend his days puttering about his dilapidated old farmhouse, or bird-watching with his neighbor and confidant, the ill-educated but imminently sensible Arnie Potter, or hosting the occasional visiting graduate student and discussing with her the colorful sexual practices of her country of origin.

And yet today Altman would be returning again to New York, the site of his first professional triumphs and his two failed marriages. After much prodding by his son, Altman had agreed to submit himself to the grotesqueries of a colonoscopy. The indignity of the business had repulsed him. It repulsed him, too, to think that David, his only son, should have been such a disappointment to him – a grey-suited MBA for some Manhattan brokerage who lived in a functional and featureless little house in Connecticut with his sharp-featured wife and their two fat, homely daughters. He blamed David's

mercantilism on his first wife, Doreen, and her blunted intelligence and shameless middle-class ambition.

The perfectly empty train was right on time.

Altman dozed in his seat and awoke to feel the train lurching into Penn Station. The platform was crowded with men in uniform.

"Typical," he thought to himself, "we descend into fascism." Altman made his way to the subway entrance only to find the way barred by a tank full of National Guardsmen. Policemen in riot gear were attempting to push back the fleeing crowds. Fleeing, Altman thought contemptuously, for the suburbs.

Stepping into a disused telephone booth to get out of the noise of the street, Altman used his new cellular telephone to call his gastroenterologist. He drew the doctor's business card from his wallet and after several misplaced jabs at the little phone's recalcitrant buttons he managed to place his call, only to find that no one was picking up. Where on earth was Dr. Schwartz?

Altman knew he had a long family history of colon cancer, a stowaway on his family's journey from Krakow to Ellis Island and then, improbably, to the New England woods. Surely, he thought, kicking aside an empty gas canister, it will be cancer that takes me in the end. There was some comfort in knowing for certain what would be his fate, Altman reflected as the canister rolled into the sewer and nestled there amid a tangle of rebar and human teeth.

He placed another call to Dr. Schwartz only to hear again the ringing telephone and then, abruptly, a click followed by a wide, serious silence.

That, Altman thought to himself, is very unprofessional. He was still fitting his cellular telephone back into its leather case when a young man with wild hair started banging on the glass door of Altman's telephone booth.

"This booth is occupied!" Altman said sharply. Altman was not a man to tolerate rudeness.

Unbelievably, the man struck the booth again. Altman slid open the door to say a sharp word, but found only a single bloodied handprint that slid down the telephone booth's door and then terminated where the impatient man now lay slumped on the pavement.

And at two o'clock in the afternoon, Altman thought. He really should be ashamed.

And so Altman found himself again in the city of his youth, now an aging man with a darkly threatening colon, and time to kill until the train back home. As if by instinct he found his steps drawing him towards the bohemian flat where his former student and lover Xenia designed the hand-painted scarves that had made her a fixture of the fashion

pages and brought her more prestige, doubtless, than she would have garnered had she continued refining her ponderous thesis on Sainte-Beuve.

Altman remembered Xenia well, her voluptuous figure enrobed in elegant silk blouses, her exotic accent and penchant for shocking crudeness. Her hair smelled like chocolate.

Altman felt something stir in him as he stepped gingerly between the twisted girders of Dr. Schwartz's former office. All around him was the buzz and pop of downed high-tension wires and the sharp whine of lasers. The sky was acrid with the smell of burning jet fuel and ozone.

In the lobby of Xenia's building the doorman sat slumped on his folding stool, a dark pool of blood oozing under the revolving doors. Altman made his way down the silent hallway, its cheap carpet caked with gore. He knocked. Xenia flung open the front door and stared at him, her fine, foreign features darkly alluring. He noticed that she was wearing no makeup and instead of her usual diaphanous blouses and scarves she was wearing a plain and rather unflattering t-shirt and jeans.

“Xenia-” he began.

“Harold? What are you doing here?” Her screeching voice sent Altman back to unpleasant memories of their last quarrels, of her petulance and tantrums and public scenes. He remembered her pitching a vase of delphiniums over the balcony at the Hotel d’Aubusson after he had told her about his dalliance with Astarte, the magnesium sculptress.

“Xenia, I-”

“How did you get here?”

“May I come in?”

“You took the train? The subway? Have they opened the roads?”

Altman found her questions tedious. With a firm hand on her yielding shoulder, he pushed his way into her flat.

“This is clearly about me –” he began.

“Harold, you aren’t listening to me. Please, listen to me very carefully – these giant robots just landed here last night, they’re in New York and Los Angeles, no one knows where they’ve come from. No one knows what’s going on. The news says it might be some sort of alien invasion, the city is locked down-”

“Xenia, I’ve never known you to be jealous. Jealousy, in the words of Roethke, is—”

“Harold! The robots are just killing people! Just indiscriminately killing anyone they find in the streets.”

“I’m an old man, Xenia. No, no – it’s true, I am. Maybe I’m too old for the excitement of this mad city, of my many young lovers. Maybe I should just go back to my peeling farmhouse and write poetry about death and bird-watching.”

“Harold, please, do not go back outside. Please, stay!”

Something about the hysteria in her voice was deeply arousing. He stopped in the doorway, feeling his vitality return.

“If you want me to stay-” he reached out and stroked the fine, firm skin of her neck and was surprised to feel her recoil.

“No, never mind. You know what? Go, go on, have a nice day!” and she pushed him out and shut the door behind him, leaving Altman standing alone in the empty hallway.

“Farewell,” he said gently. Altman turned up his collar and strolled through Times Square in the gently falling ash, his mind already on his next entry for “Talk of the Town.” He passed the hastily erected tents of the newly homeless with a quiver of indignation for his country’s wretched post-Reaganite squalor mixed with pride because he had once spent a week in Ensenada with a particularly fetching member of the SDS. Beside the Reuters building Altman glimpsed a giant metal foot. Above him the helicopters were reeling like the birds he watched with Arnie at home.

By the time Altman returned on the train it was almost eleven o’clock. The night was still, cool, and fog-dampened, and the clay fields that lay between Altman’s house and Mr. Potter’s were impassive and dark. Like the vast, empty space whence they say the killer robots came, Altman thought as he drew his blazer over his plaid workshirt. In the distance, he thought he heard the sound of a Flammulated Barn Owl.

“I’ll have to mark that one down,” he said aloud.