

Max & Rita

There was something so utterly fascinating about him. The way he twirled through life without a care in the world. His finesse and rhythm made no sense for a man his size. He was extremely tall, the type of tall that almost always forced him to duck in small doorways, and with melon sized muscles that bulged through his oaky brown skin. He could be so intimidating if he wanted to be but he carried a soft sensitivity that made him about as threatening as a park squirrel. He was funny too. Not that over the top always trying to be funny, like those lost comedians who can't process any other emotion but humor so one after the other they just drill you with joke after joke after joke until finally you just laugh in hopes to end the agony. He wasn't like that. He had a dark dad humor -- the best kind. He was also one of the greatest dancers Rita had ever seen. Dancing with him was like being lifted into another universe. One where things were calm and made a lot more sense than the one she lived in currently.

Oh and in addition to all of that, Max was a first generation robot, designed and manufactured by the brilliant minds at tech giant, Gaggle. He was part of a post- Covid mental health trial experiment where Gaggle released thousands of prototypes into the modern world to check in on current culture and the state of mental health after years of shared trauma. Their sole purpose was to live a normal life, absorbing and learning about everyday people and doing everyday things. Operation Robot Recovery they called it.

No sex though. Gaggle had a whole other set of artificial intelligence for that and they wanted their robots to really engrain themselves in the connection, not get caught up in messy love triangles. Or worse ...inspire a Love Island spinoff: *Robot Edition*.

The prototypes were separated into five groups, packaged into giant sized purple capsules and stacked onto barges. They kind of looked like car sized Viagra pills. The Gaggle team sailed all around the coasts dropping the capsules into the ocean one by one, to be washed ashore wherever they drifted. That's where Rita found him.

She was sitting alone on the beach at Coney Island, contemplating her life again. This time she was deciding whether or not she even wanted to be a dancer. It was a rat race. Her muscles always ached, her feet bled through her shoes and the only consistent job she could find was breakdancing at Bar Mitzvahs. For some reason, there were a ton of those. And now that the world has grown hybrid, many of them went virtual. Just imagine doing the horah alone in your living room, digitally alongside 11 prepubescent teens who just became "men". Yikes. After years of dancing behind a screen, she was beginning to lose steam and she could see her dream of becoming a Broadway star drifting out to sea right before her eyes. Until she saw something else instead. She thought it was a capsized boat washing up on shore. She ran to it, concerned someone was hurt or drowning, only to find it wasn't a boat at all. It was Max, her soon to be new robot friend.

Outside of the giant capsule was a button. "Push Me" it read. Rita did and within seconds the outer shell dissolved away and there he laid. A 6'4, 250 pound Black man wearing loosely fit cargo pants and a green zip up hoodie. A classic giveaway that he was conceived in Silicon Valley. He blinked his eyes feverishly for a full four minutes until finally he sat up and took Rita in.

"Hi, I'm Max" he said with a piercing white smile and a newly adjusted accent. Rita stared at him, her pupils like black olives and without saying a word just reached out and grazed his face. He felt... real. She didn't scream or flinch. She just stared and touched.

"What...are...you?" she finally said.

"I'm Max", he smirked. "And it's not polite to just touch people without asking".

They laughed and then Max went in on his legally required Gaggle spiel.

"My name is Max and I'm here because the world is sad. So many are without proper shelter or nutritious food to eat. There's trash everywhere and the world is literally burning into flames. The collective cares more about consuming things than building meaningful relationships, raising quality humans or taking care of this Earth. Children swipe away their feelings and then need pills to feel them again. And how many fucking mascaras and Marvel movies do we need, amiright?"

I was sent here to learn about what's going on. How people are feeling and why they feel that way. Have they taken the time to properly process the trauma of this lifetime and others? I'm here to attempt to get us back to happiness...or for some, finally arrive.

But of course, I'm going to need some help...Before I go any further, do you consent to be my friend and human guide?"

Rita was acting like her tough self, holding back tears. But he was so right. This world was so royally, painfully, obviously fucked.

She snapped out of her fog and responded unequivocally, YES.

That was that. Rita and Max became instant compadres. They literally did everything together. The first few months was mainly Rita asking him a series of curious robot questions while she engrained him into society.

"Can you feel that?" She'd flick him in both ears or tug on his elbows.

"I can feel everything", he'd say.

“Do you cry during sad movies?”

“If a dog dies”

“Can I see your...”

“Behave.”

“Do you find me attractive?”

“By internet standards you’re a 7.3”

Max was brutally honest and took in information like a sponge. He was a robot, after all.

“One last question” Rita leaned in close... “Can you dance?”

Without saying a word Max stood up and let out the most beautiful symphony of movements Rita had ever seen. He popped it, he locked it, he dropped it. It was absolutely poetic. Rita removed her jaw from the floor and said with certainty,

“YOU are going to be my dance partner. Broadway has just opened back up and they are revamping all of the shows. Tryouts are in three months and this is my last chance, this has to be a sign, this has to be why you’re here and why I was meant to find you that day. Please, Max. Would you?”

Max didn’t respond with words, rather got back up and continued to groove his big ass off, inviting Rita to join in.

They practiced constantly. The cha cha, the miremba, the waltz, you name it. They studied history to learn the origins of each move so they could learn about time periods and what people might have been thinking while moving like that. It’s so important to note that the history lesson wasn’t part of the original plan but Max literally couldn’t stop regurgitating everything he was learning. He was a wealth of information and to be honest, a bit of a gossip.

On the days they weren’t practicing, Max would fill Rita in on what he was observing. You can tell that he was developing his personality as time went on and was turning into a truly charming and empathetic robot human thing. Their friendship was real.

“All day people stare at their screens. To go to work. To connect with friends. To shop. To order meals. They are so disconnected from natural reality and from each other but most importantly, they’re disconnected from themselves..and this magnificent Earth we occupy. No one knows who they are anymore so they just pick an avatar and play along. Like life was some sort of video

game simulation rather than this once in this lifetime experience. So much unprocessed pain and untapped potential... but instead of healing and feeling... they consume and conspire. Billionaires sending people to space like carnival rides at millions of dollars a pop while 1/3 of the population can't afford vegetables. Where is the balance? The harmony? Where is the empathy for the world we all SHARE?"

Rita was one of the woke ones. She totally understood what Max was processing and often dwelled in his same disposition. How could people walk through this life so numb? Without care. Without love. It's all we have.

While Rita and Max were growing their friendship and dancing their toes off, the Gaggle experiment was in full force in other parts of the country and of course, in this social media dystopia - - coverage was happening in real time, all of the time. Max and Rita were amongst the few that chose not to put their relationship on display. They were too busy boogying. But as you can imagine, all of the other humans ate up the opportunity for clout that they were robot guides. Shame.

But just because they didn't want to put themselves on blast didn't mean they didn't tune in from time to time. And they saw some pretty interesting things...

They'd scroll through robots being used as task masters - to do the chores or read stories to the kids at night so the parents could "be alone".

Or gross young people things like Robots playing drinking games and putting phallic things in and around their mouths.

Some people are really just so asleep to the point. To this life.

But there was also some sweet stuff..

Robots getting to know people. Actually paying attention. Much like Max and Rita.

Robots playing chess with people in the park. Listening, smiling, laughing.

Robots problem solving amongst underserved communities and finally treating them as humans, not societal outcasts.

There was also a lot of coverage on the news...

The CEO of Gaggle, Jeff Jefferson, was always going OFF about how his initiative was going to save the world and solve all of our problems. Lots of people disagreed. Lots of people actually thought he was an overzealous kook with a superiority complex.

He was a bit of a dillweed - but he had a lot of passion for the project and overall felt like an OK guy. A guy that was actually onto something...

They'd get so sucked in by the experiment - - but then Rita would clap her hands in front of Max's eyes. *back to dancing*

Rita would never let them get too distracted. "Off the screens and back to the beans" she'd say.

"That doesn't even make sense", Max would retort.

What did he know? He was just a robot...

But either way, they were getting good. Really good. Like scary good.

They only had one fight. And damn, it was a wild one.

It was during Max's "prank stage". His algorithm changed on TikTok and he was only being served those awful pranks that people played on people that they - ya know, claimed they love - doing astronomically annoying things just for reactions and likes and probably a future domestic violence suit if we're being honest. So for like two weeks he was constantly pranking Rita...

At first it was standard gag stuff like greasing the door knobs and hiding fake spiders in the cabinets...

Then it got progressively more twisted - putting mayo in her tooth paste, staging that he cut off a finger with spews of fake blood everywhere and seran wrapping the toilet seat so pee got all over when Rita got up to go during the night - fucking gross.

But one time he really took it too far. Rita was out on a date and Max was going to surprise her with his best prank yet - inspired by a scene he saw in the movie Home Alone...

He rigged the door of her apartment to trigger a bucket of thick maple syrup to fall on her head when she opened it - which would trigger a standing fan to turn on which would blow a pile of bird feathers onto sticky Rita which would trigger Max to point at her, laugh and bawk like a chicken.

He had it all figured out. Except for the fact that it wasn't Rita to walk through the door first. It was her date - Brian.

And not only did Brian HATE pranks but he was allergic to the pollen in the feathers Max used...

And had to be rushed to the ER to prevent his throat from closing.

Where Rita had to sit with him. For six hours. Listening to Brian go OFF on how much he can't stand the smell of maple syrup.

Rita didn't talk to Max for a whole week after that - which luckily was enough time for his algorithm to change from Prank-tok to Witch-tok and he crafted a heartfelt astrology inspired apology.

Also of course things didn't work out with Brian - but Max didn't feel bad about that, he was a pompous dweeb anyway.

Even though Max was programmed to not be sexually attracted to the humans, he couldn't help but get jealous of all Rita's lovers. And boy, were their lovers...

Max's favorite was the guy that would pick Rita up on a unicycle. He'd literally show up on a single wheeled, single seated bike and then just ride right alongside her as they walked to dinner or wherever they were going and he'd think nothing of it...he'd even hold her hand.

That's weird, right? Impressive. But so strange...

Anyway, the day of the competition was approaching FAST. Max & Rita were crushing their choreography and had assembled something so magnificent, it was going to make your heart stop. Like for maybe 1 second you'd actually be dead. Are you ready for this lineup?

Open on Shaggy's, Mr. Boombastic. An INSTANT mood booster.

That epic dum riff from Phil Colin's "In The Air Tonight" at minute 3:43

Two originals written from 7 different languages and inspired by 8 fusions of dance culture (Max's idea)

Drum fills, flutes, sound bytes from important moments in history and interviews with iconic changemakers...

Ending on... wait for it.... That BANGER from Moana. It was beyond exceptional. It was undeniable JOY.

And she couldn't have done it without Max. She wouldn't have wanted to.

Needless to say there wasn't an ounce of nerves for this audition so once the day came they did what they did every morning...

Hand washed the dishes while whistling Dolly Parton's 9 to 5.

When they arrived they pulled number 11. Classic good luck angel number role check ayooooo. They sat silently holding hands until their number was called and the moment it was - they took a big inhale and shared the deepest gaze of appreciation for one another and what they've created...

Clap "Let's get ready for the spotlight", Rita focused them in and they went.

Five Judges sat stoically in front of a large empty and echoey theatre. It was so silent, Max and Rita could hear the *click" of the mouse that began their track.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1...BOOM. The moment the music started to play they defaulted right back into practice mode. Fully focused, fearlessly alive.

But before Shaggy could even get into the fast rap part, something was off. Max grew wobbly and his eyeballs turned completely black. He sank to the - more like thunk to the ground - his 250 pound robot body growing lifeless and limp on stage right before Rita's eyes.

Rita FREAKED.THE.FUCK.OUT. She ran to him. Trying to resuscitate him back to life but she quickly realized that there was nothing she could do. He was a robot. You couldn't just give him mouth to mouth or put him in an ambulance. Helplessness set in.

She tried to explain to the judges, but she could barely make out their reactions through her sad blurry eyes and the bright stage lights. She was so broken. Her best friend just got powered down by a tech company and she had no idea what to do about it.

She blankly walked out of the theatre and onto the street for some air and immediately noticed everyone looking down on their phones eerily more than normal, she heard buzzing about Gaggle and noticed a LIVE news report projecting on a nearby billboard featuring Gaggle CEO, Jeff Jefferson.

"Gaggle has shut down the Operation Robot Recovery due to several robots in southern Missouri accused of "illegal gambling, lewd behavior and unsolicited violence" - - further investigation into this matter is being conducted and we'll be reporting every second of the way - for now all robots have been powered down until we can properly assess the accusations...Gaggle sincerely appolo...."

Rita tuned it out. She couldn't believe this. Max was a part of her now, how could she possibly live without him?

Days went by and she laid lifeless on her bed, unapologetically indulging in all of her favorite coping mechanisms: xanax, kit kats and mastur-crying (a combination between masterbating and crying).

The only thing that got her up was this loud ass THUD that slammed against her apartment door one evening. She opened it up to see what the fuckkkk and there - there was Max.

"You wouldn't believe this..." he started right away ..."But thanks to those Missouri bots, we all have to go back to headquarters. They turned us all back on so we could get on a bus back to California...A fucking bus? I came here in a capsule...Cheapskates."

Rita dusted off her smile for the first time in a while and squeezed him harder than she knew she had the strength for.

"You CAN'T go Max. You CAN'T. Don't get on that bus, stay here with me and we'll just live together and I'll take care of you. Fuck the dancing, we can forget about all of that. I just ... I just NEED you. "

Max cocked his head and put his hand on her shoulder...

"Oh sweet Rita. I wish I could stay with you forever but I have to go back. I have to complete my mission and help heal the world...but before I do... you MUST know... You tell me all the time how wonderful I am. How I'm kind to the core and a pure act of good and truth. That I see people. I listen. I am patient, wise, funny, smart, strong...painstakingly handsome ;)

But you must realize by now that I am you. I am a robot. Everything I learned comes from watching, observing and being with you. And YOU are amongst the realest, truest, kindest human beings on this planet. Rita, YOU are the solution to this world's complacency. Just being YOU brings JOY. And that's what the people need. You shine my weird human friend, I will definitely forget you because I can't control my programming. But our love and our dance and our time together will always live on. Rock it Rita, I human love your ass"

You can imagine how emotional this moment was... *[For Rita, robots have a tough time emoting naturally]*

She was snot crying and held onto Max's ankles for 45 minutes before he just started walking with her attached. Down the hallway of her apartment. Into the elevator. She would have gone all the way to the bus station with him had she not been defeated by the revolving doors.

It was so sad to see someone you love leave. But what he and the others left behind was nothing short of a pure MAGIC miracle...

Rita finally became Rita.

And everyone else that encountered one of the robots began to awaken - recognizing and becoming their authentic selves - caring for others - finding meaning in their lives and living it with purpose and pride.

Billionaires and corporations started to exercise their empathy and began donating exorbitant amounts of money to initiatives aimed at solving some of the world's deepest issues: poverty, mental health, climate change, over consumption, addiction.

People started voluntarily cleaning up the streets. Picking up trash they didn't put there. Because they realized that all trash is our trash when it's clogging up our one shared world.

For the first time in decades, humans cared enough about themselves to start putting others first.

And of course Rita still got a job on Broadway. That was all a part of the plan. They invited her to redo her audition and she nailed it.

Nailed it so hard that they turned her choreography into its own Broadway mini segment performance. She called it "Rita To The Max."

It sold out every seat, every time because it made people leave feeling good, feeling joy.

Back at Headquarters, they chalked up the mishap in Missouri as a few defected robots that learned from defected humans.

But they still gathered enough information to start having real conversations about the human form and how they can apply their findings on a global scale. The intel Max learned from Rita played a huge role in the recovery plan - which they internally called "Lovely Rita."

There was A LOT of work to do. Research also confirmed that the world was indeed, royally fucked. We've gone way too far down the hole of capitalistic gain and have lost sight of basic human dignities and simple pleasures in the process...

But you've got to give it to Jeff Jefferson - - - he helped give the world a regained sense of HOPE. Of Purpose. He reminded us that no one person is better than the next and that if we don't begin to LOVE and CARE for one another... we're no different than robots.

[END]