

SIX DAYS

IN THE LIFE OF MOM, 2126

THE END IS ALWAYS THE
WAY IT ENDS.



BY RICK BUTTS

ONCE THEY DON'T NEED HER, WHAT'S THE
POINT OF MOM?

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by

Rick Butts

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MATS, a man, about to turn 21, professional basketball player, gay. Voice of MATS' ANSWER GREETING.

THENA, a woman, 23, a birthday wisher clerk in a government call centre. Also AUTOFUS, a mega-celebrity superhero who is often fighting villains in other galaxies. Sister of MATS. Voice of THENA'S ANSWER GREETING.

NORA MAI, a woman, 40s, mother of THENA and MATS, maternal autonomous interface, a MAI, an artificial human who presents as a fully human.

ADMINISTRATOR, any gender or nonbinary, any age, government bureaucrat, voice only.

SCENE

Three separate character spaces on stage which can be in spotlights as needed on an otherwise bare stage. Or it can be a full set with partitions. Lighting is used to bring characters into the story. Otherwise they are in darkness or absent.

The background in each character's space speaks to their preoccupations and personalities. It need not be realistic but may be suggested by a few items. The descriptions are offered only as suggestions. The background scenery should be staged however it works best in theatre.

On SR, THENA's studio apartment offers a view of a chaotic and messy living room littered with pizza boxes, takeout containers, and articles of clothing, including several glittery pink superhero capes. Pink is a prominent colour in her superhero accessories. On SL, elements of MATS's elegant living room speak to a lifestyle that is as exquisitely curated as the implied mansion where it takes place. At SC, NORA MAI's kitchen reveals counters crowded with utensils, small appliances, food prep bowls and ingredients in cans, boxes and bags.

The characters interact with each other through live voice calls, sophisticated answer greetings that respond to unique callers and written messages that intuitively engage in discussions between senders and recipients on demand. A new technology in 2126 that appears in some communications tech is *artificial prescience* or AP. This technology detects what it thinks callers want before they ask and offers *pre-answers*. It's still a bit buggy.

An earlier form of artificial prescience developed in the 2100s uses emotive musical phrases to signal the identity, personality, mood and intention of incoming callers so calls can be screened. Calls from the elegant MATS are generally announced with understated jazz themes, gentle, slightly mournful, often piano. Calls from THENA are signaled by classic rock and roll standards and loud rolling thunder. When it's NORA MAI on the line, it's all percussion, low-end, ominous drums, crash cymbals, tribal, demanding attention.

TIME & PLACE

Six days in June 2126, various places on planet Earth.

SYNOPSIS

Over six days in 2126, brother and sister Mats and Thena figure out what to do with Mom. Once her youngest child Mats turns twenty-one in less than a week, Nora Mai will be taken out of service, 'deregistered' and put out for recycling. Nora Mai is a maternal autonomous interface (MAI), an artificial life form, and the only mother they have ever known.

They can keep her alive if they ask the government for an exemption (there is the 'exemption directive' available to them). The only problem is that Mom must move in with one of them to meet the requirements of the exemption. Mats is a fabulously rich professional basketball player with the means to provide for her but not sure he can take her. Thena has a side gig as Autofus, a mega-celebrity superhero who fights super villains around the galaxy and feels her work's not conducive to having Mom underfoot. A sympathetic bureaucrat who is a fan of superheroes pulls some strings and the exemption is granted just in time. However Nora Mai has other plans.

SETTING: MATS's living room on the left. A laptop sits open on a coffee table.

AT RISE: MATS walks on stage and stands staring at the laptop. He touches the keyboard and watches the screen.

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Thursday June 13 and there's only six days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday! Anyone else, leave a message. At the beep.
(Beep.)

MATS

C'mon. I know you're back.

(Lights up on THENA's studio apartment. A ratty armchair dominates the messy space. A laptop sits on the chair. THENA charges onstage dressed as Autofus in a black and pink bodysuit, pulling off a glittery pink cape as she rushes to the chair. Still wearing Autofus' balaclava mask, she fishes around under the cushions, finds a headset.)

THENA

Hey Mats.

MATS

They're going to deregister Mom.

THENA

What do you mean deregister?

MATS

You should pick up your messages.

THENA

(With emphasis.)

What do you mean deregister?

MATS

Pull the plug on her. Turn her off. On my birthday in . . .

(Pause, counts the days.)

—six days. June 18, 2126. I turn 21 and they kill Mom—.

THENA

They can't. Who?

MATS

Foundling Sanctuary Services. I got a message from the Administrator. You were copied. Maybe if you bothered to check your messages—

THENA

The FSS? They don't exist. When they closed the sanctuary system for kids, they closed FSS.

MATS

Well they're back. And they're coming for Mom. On my birthday.

THENA

This has to be a mistake—

MATS

That's what I thought when I got the message a week ago. And left you a thousand messages saying a shadowy government agency is planning on killing Mom and maybe you can call me.

THENA

You know I was away. There are so many dead zones once you're past the Milky Way.

MATS

Then get a plan with galaxy roaming. But you probably wouldn't hear your phone over a million strangers screaming 'we love Autofus' as you do loops and buzz the crowds with pink flyby.

THENA

That's not fair. And don't say that on this channel.

MATS

Sorry. Maybe you ask *your good friend* Autofus if she could tear herself away from her busy schedule as an A-list superhero and give me a hand saving my mom's life.

THENA

What's the message say?

MATS

(Reading from a tablet.)

When there's no kids under twenty-one assigned to the maternal autonomous interface—that's a MAI, Mom's a MAI—

THENA

I know what Mom is. What are they saying about her?

MATS

Eligibility for *our* MAI ends on my birthday. She's being deregistered.

THENA

That's it?

MATS

Let me see. On plug pulling day, we're not to let her go out alone. She shouldn't fly any high-speed mobility carts. She should be prevented from handling weapons.

THENA

She doesn't have any weapons! And she doesn't fly. Some asshole wrote all this because their boss told them to write up bullshit—.

MATS

Sounds quite sensible from a bureaucrat arranging to kill someone's mother.

THENA

I'll deal with it.

MATS

If we don't keep her in that day, they track her. FSS agents pick her up, take her to a facility.

THENA

This isn't how it's supposed to happen. She gets to live her own life. In her own place. She's not hurting anyone. They can't do this to her.

MATS

Really? Listen.

(Reading from a tablet.)

Eligibility for MAI 2107 FS-182 TM expires June 18, 2126 at which time it will be deregistered. It will retain only minimal functionality. It will no longer initiate communications. On the scheduled pick-up day, place it at the recycling location by seven a.m. Instruct it to give this notice to the recovery agents. Direct it to wait, front facing the road, until collected.

THENA

No. We're not doing that. No one's doing that to Mom.

MATS

Will she know it's happening? What about her memories of us? Of her life ? Does it hurt her?

(Glancing at a tablet.)

They say it doesn't experience any simulated feelings of pain or anxiety. It just stops.

MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up.

THENA

That's her.

MATS

You better answer. She'll be calling me next. Game's in Tokyo in twenty minutes and it takes an extra minute to get through the atmosphere over Vancouver this time of day.

THENA

You didn't tell her any of this?

MATS

You're awfully dense for having the brain of a superhero. Of course not.

THENA

Where'd you say you're playing?

MATS

Tokyo. Team limo's hovering outside my window now. We got to pick up a guy in Australia. Then we're in Japan in maybe twenty minutes. Talk when I get to my hotel.

THENA

Love you Mats. We'll fix this.

MATS

Love you back.

MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme louder & out.

(Lights down on MATS. Lights up on NORA MAI. She's making food, a laptop on the counter.)

THENA

(Tears off her headset and mask. Pulls her headset on as she slaps keyboard.)

Hey Mom.

NORA MAI

Thena! You're back. I can't see you.

THENA

I just got out of the shower.

NORA MAI

I'm your mother. I'm allowed to see you in a bathrobe. Why isn't your view screen on?

THENA

I didn't know who was calling.

NORA MAI

Then why'd you answer? You're a woman. You want calls from all the Toms, Dicks and Harrys?

THENA

You make that sound more fun than it probably is.

NORA MAI

Don't be crude. Twenty-three, grown woman, and still single. If some marauder shows up on your balcony, wouldn't you be surprised? You with your windows always open.

THENA

I *would* be surprised. I'm fifteen hundred floors up. We don't even get pigeons crapping here.

NORA MAI

Perverts always find a way.

THENA

Unless it's King Kong or Spiderman, no one's climbing up here to peek in my windows.

NORA MAI

Make fun. I didn't raise you so you could throw your life away.

THENA

Sorry. You're right. I won't throw my life away.

NORA MAI

It's a mother's job to look after her kids. You know that, don't you?

THENA

I do. Next time, I won't answer unless I know who's calling.

NORA MAI

You need to get a better job. You're wasted in that call centre.

THENA

I like my job.

NORA MAI

It's a dead-end. You dial numbers on a list—

THENA

Actually, they're dialed for me. I talk when someone answers—

NORA MAI

Don't be ms smarty pants. You know what I mean. You disturb people at home to tell them their birthday's coming. That's a ridiculous job.

THENA

They can take their birthday off. It's a government-approved vacation. I call to remind them.

NORA MAI

No future in a job like that.

THENA

We talk the day *before* their birthday. About *tomorrow*. Literally, that's the future, Mom. Can't get a job with more future in it than that.

NORA MAI

Wishing strangers happy birthday. This is what you want to do for the rest of your life? Your little brother has a professional job. I don't need to worry if he eats properly.

THENA

Mats is a basketball player. He has people who make his food. Geeze, Mom, he's got people who *taste* his food.

NORA MAI

You should put on something nice and go out with one of his friends.

THENA

I want to talk about you Mom. How are you feeling? You good?

NORA MAI

You call strangers more than you call your mother. Now you want to ask about me?

THENA

You're my mom. Can't I ask about you?

NORA MAI

It's not my birthday tomorrow. You sure you got time to talk? Since you're suddenly so interested in your family, what's the plan for the big day?

THENA

What day? Has anyone talked to you?

NORA MAI

If I hadn't heard your cheeky message about 'little brother versioning' I'd think you'd forgotten about it. Mats turns twenty-one. He's grown up. He doesn't need me. I'm okay with that.

THENA

What? He needs you. What are you saying you're okay with? We both need you.

NORA MAI

You know that's not true. But it's nice to hear it. I have to accept it.

THENA

Accept what?

NORA MAI

My goodness Thena, are your headphones on? His birthday. This is a big one for him and our family. I don't want to make it about me but I know I'll end up crying—

THENA

Crying? Why? What would you be crying about, Mom?

NORA MAI

I think we should have a plan. Make arrangements. *(beat)* I'll be glad to get it done with. At the end of that day, I'll still have the memories of my babies. No one can take that away from me—

(Oven timer starts count down, ten, nine, eight . . .)

THENA

Mom, what arrangements?

(Oven timer count down continues over Thena.)

NORA MAI

Gotta go. Baking's done. We'll talk later, baby.

(Lights down on NORA MAI. Lights on THENA. Takes off her headset, looks at a monitor, taps some keys.)

THENA

So much laundry to do.

(Starts to exit. Monitor sounds error thud. THENA returns.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Sort by date. In the last seven days.

(Error thud as search fails.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Maybe two weeks ago.

(Error thud.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Try. . . 'Foundling'.

(Error thud.)

THENA (CONT'D)

(Reciting slowly. Taps on keyboard.)

Okay. I know this. Device version is

(pause)

'M—A—I'. Startup year. '2—1—zero—7'.

(pause)

'F—S—' for Foundling Sanctuary. Region '1—8—2'. Haven't thought about that since we left.

(pause)

Kid codes oldest to youngest 'T—M—'.

(Happy chime.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Got you! Read letter.

ADMINISTRATOR

(Voice is robotic.)

Dear subscriber to MAI 2107 FS-182 TM—

THENA

She has a name.

ADMINISTRATOR

Our records do not show an alternate name for MAI 2107 FS-182 TM. Are you authorized to update identity profile?

THENA

Umm, I guess so.

ADMINISTRATOR

What is your relationship to MAI 2107 FS-182 TM?

THENA

Daughter.

ADMINISTRATOR

You are verified. What designation would you like to assign to MAI 2107 FS-182 TM?

THENA

Her first name is Nora. Her family name's the same as mine. It's—

ADMINISTRATOR

The identity profile accommodates only one user-designated name. The name has been changed to Nora. Registered as Nora MAI. Shall we continue?

THENA

Fine.

ADMINISTRATOR

Eligibility for Nora MAI expires June 18, 2126. Deregistration is scheduled. Apology for inconvenience issued.

THENA

You understand that's *six* days from now?

ADMINISTRATOR

You will be notified the day before and offered a three-hour window. Otherwise, deregistration may occur any time after seven a.m. We apologize for inconvenience.

THENA

Stop apologizing for inconvenience. It's not inconvenient. It's horrific.

ADMINISTRATOR

We note an emotional response. We offer validation that such a response is valid.

THENA

Do you understand what I'm saying to you?

ADMINISTRATOR

This interaction is documented and profiled against all available human language models including dialects. You may be assured we understand you.

THENA

Why are you going to kill my mom?

ADMINISTRATOR

The designation ‘mom’ is not biologically accurate. You intend in this context to communicate strong affection. Your profile is updated to note that you express strong affection for mom.

THENA

Yes, I have strong affection for Mom. What do you think I feel about you coming by to kill her?

ADMINISTRATOR

A site visit has not been noted for deregistration. Would you like to request one? Eligibility for Nora MAI expires June 18, 2126. We wish to achieve deregistration with no inconvenience.

THENA

You can’t even say you’re sorry? For what you’re doing to us? To our family?

ADMINISTRATOR

We can accommodate that request. ‘We are sorry.’

THENA

Stop talking.

ADMINISTRATOR

Our apologies. If we don’t engage, our chat will end. We detect a heightened emotional reaction and wish to signal validation. If it is helpful, we will say again that we are sorry. ‘We are sorry.’

THENA

Yeah. I’m sorry too. I gotta do laundry.

(Lights down on THENA. Pause as day passes. Lights up on THENA in a bathrobe. Taps on keyboard.)

THENA’S ANSWER GREETING

If it’s you again Mom, I know it’s already Friday June 14 and there’s only five days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday! Anyone else, leave a message. At the beep.
(Beep.)

THENA

Continue chat about Mom letter.

ADMINISTRATOR

Have you completed your laundry?

THENA

Why are you talking about my laundry?

ADMINISTRATOR

To demonstrate empathy. You indicated yesterday you wished to complete laundry.

THENA

Laundry's done. Can we talk about Nora Mai? You can't do this to her.

ADMINISTRATOR

There is exemption. We have previously sent the application as 'Exemption for Thena Redacted / Mats Redacted for Maternal Autonomous Interface MAI 2107 FS-182 TM.'

(pause)

Our apologies. The application is amended to apply to 'Nora Mai.'

THENA

When did you send this?

MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up & out.

(Lights up on NORA MAI making food.)

ADMINISTRATOR

Perhaps you check your junk folder?

THENA

Administrator, hold that thought. I have to take this. *(beat)* Hey Mom.

NORA MAI

Your view screen's fixed. You look tired. You've got bags under your eyes.

THENA

Mom, I'm on another call.

NORA MAI

With a man?

THENA

Yes. I mean, no, not a man. Or maybe. It's a work call.

NORA MAI

Just say so Thena. Have you thought about your brother's birthday? I think you should be here.

THENA

Why do you need to know now?

NORA MAI

I'd like us to be together as a family. Make it nice.

THENA

Nice?

NORA MAI

Nice for me. I want to feel like your mother again before I lose the memory of it. File it away so I never forget. I don't worry about things, don't care about the idea of death. But I'm afraid—

THENA

What are you afraid of Mom?

NORA MAI

Of feeling big feelings I wasn't built for. Until I met you two. It was like a 'feelings' chip got turned on in my head. *(beat)*. But no worries now. Talking to my daughter about my son's twenty-first birthday. How could any mother not feel good about that? Promise me you'll come.

THENA

Of course, Mom. I'll be there but I want to talk now—

NORA MAI

No. Hanging up. I've interrupted your work. We can talk later.

(Lights down on NORA MAI.)

MUSIC: THENA's classic rock theme up & out.

(Lights on THENA. Looks at her monitor.)

THENA

Hey Administrator. Come back. Tell me about the exemption.

ADMINISTRATOR

When there is anxiety in a child attributed to an impending deregistration of a MAI which may be attested to by professional person, an exemption may be available.

THENA

An exemption from what? The deregistration of the MAI? Explain.

ADMINISTRATOR

A MAI that has not been deregistered may be transferred to the custody of an adult child to reside primarily with that child and allowed limited visits with any other adult children.

THENA

This exemption. My brother could get it?

ADMINISTRATOR

Yes. Or you. Which ever of you accepts responsibility for the residency requirement. And a professional from the community attests to the application's veracity.

THENA

What kind of professional?

ADMINISTRATOR

The usual kind. A *professional* professional. A lawyer, a doctor, a police officer.

THENA

A superhero?

ADMINISTRATOR

We don't typically see them, but we imagine a superhero would be acceptable.

THENA

Administrator, can you hold just a sec? I hear someone at the door.

(Shouts off.)

Autofus? Hi. Come in. Just on the phone with this nice person from the government.

(THENA exits. Puts on her Autofus mask and returns.)

THENA / AUTOFUS

Please note that Autofus, designation *Superhero, Nine Star*, has joined the chat.

ADMINISTRATOR

Is that Autofus? We're a huge fan. Can we get a screen shot of the two of us?

THENA / AUTOFUS

And risk galaxy security? Absolutely not! Nothing gets out about this. May I call you Addy?

ADMINISTRATOR

Addy! Yeah, sure. Wow oh wow! I can't believe I'm talking to *Autofus, Superhero, Nine Star!*

THENA / AUTOFUS

Autofus is fine.

ADMINISTRATOR

Wow oh wow! Yes sir. Or ma'am. Is Thena Redacted coming back?

THENA / AUTOFUS

Soon. She had to take the dog out for a pee.

ADMINISTRATOR

You're on a call and now they need to go out! Why? And barking when your boss's on the call!

THENA / AUTOFUS

That's nice. My good friend Thena and her lovely mom love dogs. You would not believe how close we are. Now about that exemption, I understand you need me to sign off—

ADMINISTRATOR

Don't worry about that. Consider it done. For you Ms Autofus. I'll fill out the application myself. Got all the info I need. I can certify it as signed. Keep you off it. For reasons of galaxy security.

THENA / AUTOFUS

Really. Addy, you're like a real superhero on this. But I want to be able to tell my friend so maybe you can explain how we can be sure that it all goes through smoothly?

ADMINISTRATOR

One of the children says they'll have her move in. Whose name do you think they want on the application?

THENA / AUTOFUS

My brother. I mean, the son Mats. And the deregistration?

ADMINISTRATOR

It doesn't happen. When the application's approved, we transfer custody. The son takes full responsibility for Nora Mai and she lives with him. Happily ever after.

THENA / AUTOFUS

Nora Mai won't be deregistered?

ADMINISTRATOR

She's no longer government property. She belongs to the family. If this option is of interest to them, we have a disclaimer they must hear.

THENA / AUTOFUS

You can tell me.

ADMINISTRATOR

You might want to record it. It's very legal and important. *(beat)* 'After age twenty-one, the continued influence of a maternal caregiver is not helpful for a transition to healthy adulthood.'

THENA / AUTOFUS

That's it? The government says we shouldn't let Mom run our lives? Less mama drama? Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR

When I get everything approved, I'll send Thena Redacted the final documents.

THENA / AUTOFUS

I'm sure she'd like that. Addy, can you answer something for me? If you have this exemption directive so MAIs don't have to be deregistered, why put families through all this stress?

ADMINISTRATOR

It's the deal the tech companies made with government. MAIs as artificial life forms must meet the standard of human-equivalent care for children. There's only one way to make it happen.

THENA / AUTOFUS

Which is?

ADMINISTRATOR

Program the MAIs to think they're human. Technology's easy. Just needed government buy-in.

THENA / AUTOFUS

Which they had.

ADMINISTRATOR

They pushed out a software update and overnight they created life. Artificial humans who didn't know they were artificial. The problems came later. When they tried to recycle the MAIs at the end of their life cycle. Their kids loved them and they weren't going to have it.

THENA / AUTOFUS

Can you imagine that? Kids loving their mothers.

ADMINISTRATOR

But that was only the half of it. The MAIs were reciprocating those feelings.

THENA / AUTOFUS

So now you're really weirding me out. Mothers loving their kids too!

ADMINISTRATOR

You have no idea the tizz this caused at FSS. MAIs have no programming for this. You can't write code to make someone love a child. There is *no* coding for love. Obviously, these artificial humans were implementing code no one had ever seen before.

THENA / AUTOFUS

Rewriting their code. So they can love their children?

ADMINISTRATOR

Not *rewriting* code. Inventing it. And sharing it with others. It's still a problem.

THENA / AUTOFUS

And the government wants to kill them off when their kids are twenty-one. Yeah, a problem.

ADMINISTRATOR

It's not the government's fault. It's the deal with the tech companies. The MAIs get shut down and recycled so big tech can make new ones to sell to the government to take care of more kids. If anyone feels sad about this, it's government policy to feel sad too.

THENA / AUTOFUS

You didn't know that kids would love their mothers? Even if they were MAIs?

ADMINISTRATOR

We're bureaucratic, not omniscient.

THENA / AUTOFUS

Addy, if they don't know they're artificial, what do they think they are? *(beat)* No don't answer. I know. They're moms. People. The kind who would do anything to protect their kids.

ADMINISTRATOR

When you put it like that, it sounds almost . . . touching.

THENA / AUTOFUS

End call.

(Lights on THENA as removes her mask.)

MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up & out.
(Lights up on NORA MAI in her kitchen.)

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.
(Lights up on MATS' living room. He's not there.)

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

You've reached *Welcome Mats*. I'm not here or I don't want to talk to you. Think before you leave a message I'm not going to listen to. At the beep.

(Beep.)

NORA MAI

Mats. I know you don't like chatty messages. It's your mother. Make sure you stay hydrated. Stop taking stupid fouls. Move your feet so you don't have to reach in.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Mom, this isn't me. It's the message app my agent has me endorsing. It's next gen *AP. Artificial Prescience*. It knows what you're going to say before you say it.

NORA MAI

I'm wondering where you are right now.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Stayed overnight in Japan. Leaving Tokyo now. I'll be back in Vancouver in about thirty minutes. If you need something, call Thena. *(beat)* Mats says to Mats' mom, we love his mom.

NORA MAI

I'm thinking about your birthday.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

You want me to come home on my birthday. You've checked the team schedule. No game. Mats says to Mats' mom, sure thing Mom.

NORA MAI

Do you know why?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

It's a special day and you think it would be nice because—
(Error beep.)

NORA MAI

That's enough. I want my children to here for your birthday.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

You think it would be nice because there will be . . . meat that is in an oven—

NORA MAI

Yes. And a cake.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

You think it's the day when your children no longer need you. You wonder what other mothers feel like on the day when—

Stop. Out of my head—

NORA MAI

(Error beep.)

NORA MAI (CONT'D)

Mats, I would like you here. On your birthday. Thena's coming. Okay?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Mats says to Mats' mom, date is recorded. Appointment at location Mats' mom. Attendees Mats, Mats' sister. It will be nice. There will be meat from an oven. Confirm to confirm, Mats' mom.

NORA MAI

Confirm.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Mats says to Mats' mom, stay hydrated and move your feet.

NORA MAI

Mats baby. You know what I'm thinking right now?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

You think you love Mats. You think Mats is your favourite.

NORA MAI

I think your message app is buggy.

(Lights down on NORA MAI.)

MUSIC: THENA's classic rock theme up & out.
(Lights on THENA as she listens to her answer greeting.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Friday June 14 and there's only five days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

THENA

Mats, you were supposed to call me.

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.
(Lights up on MATS' living room. He's not there.)

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

You've reached *Welcome Mats*. I'm not here or I don't want to talk to you. Think before you leave a message I'm not going to listen to. At the beep.
(Beep.)

THENA

Mats, where in the world are you?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Mats says to Mats' sister, on planet Earth. 27 degrees, 28 minutes, 11 seconds, *south*. 153 degrees, 1 minute 30 seconds, *east*.

THENA

Brisbane? You're in Australia? Going or coming home?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Mats says to Mats' sister, holding for descent. Absolute altitude, one hundred and seven miles—

THENA

Mats, stop.

(Error beep.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Call me. We have a plan. Mom's going to be fine—

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Mats says to Mats' sister, stay hydrated and move your feet—

THENA

Mats, stop. *(beat)* The Administrator is cancelling everything. We're getting an exemption. Mom moves in with you and everyone lives happily ever after. *(beat)*. I hate your message app.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING

Mats says to Mats' sister, you think the message app is buggy. Mats says to Mats' sister, stay hydrated and Mats is Mom's favourite.

(Lights down on MATS' living room, down on THENA.)

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.

(Lights up on MATS. Wearing dark glasses.)

(Lights up on THENA.)

THENA

You didn't call after the game. What's with the glasses?

MATS

Got an elbow to the face. Crushed an eye socket and a bit of my cheek. Didn't feel up to a chat.

THENA

You sore?

MATS

More tingly than sore. Had an infusion of crawly things. They're moving around chewing out bad bits, gluing stuff back together. Skin's a bit tender.

THENA

See what happens when your big sister's not there to protect you. They're nanobots. Had them. They work.

MATS

I can't have Mom move in.

THENA

You got fifty rooms in that mansion of yours.

MATS

And she'll be snooping through every one of them.

THENA

Why is this a problem for you?

MATS

Not for me. For David.

THENA

Did you tell him?

MATS

That an alien life form is moving in. No.

THENA

That's mean.

MATS

A joke. She's . . . you know, a lot. Like a billion nanobots in your face trying to fix you up. Except eventually the nanobots are removed.

THENA

You're saying Mom can get in your face?

MATS

If I take her, where does she stay so she's not running across David? It's his home too.

THENA

Put her in a guest cottage with a kitchen. She'll bake non-stop. She just has to have your address.

MATS

What happens the first morning I'm on the road and she finds David making a latte at the coffee bar in his pajamas?

THENA

Knowing her, she probably starts baking muffins and they hit it off just fine.

MATS

And if they don't? I can't leave David to deal with her on his own. What do I tell him?

THENA

Maybe it's time to tell *her*. Tell her you love lattes and muffins. Then slip in a bit about David.

MATS

Slip in what bit about David *exactly*?

THENA

That he's more than your tax accountant. Maybe that he's your husband?

MATS

David's not the girl she imagined I'd marry.

THENA

You can't live your whole life keeping a secret like that from your mother.

MATS

Like you're so open with her about your side gig.

THENA

Different and you know it. Let her be part of your big-boy life.

MATS

Last week, she texted our point guard and gave him a play to run through me.

THENA

She knows basketball. It's good for her to be involved.

MATS

Involved? It was a timeout in the third quarter and she's calling the bench.

THENA

She thinks they should put the ball in your hands. So do I. Maybe you take the ball here.

MATS

Enough with the metaphors. This is life, not a game.

THENA

Fine. Here's the highlight reel of her life. In 2107, she comes for us in sanctuary. Picks us, takes us home, makes us a family. Says she will love us forever. *Forever*. Which includes loving you as you are now.

MATS

My lawyers looked into this. Either of us can do it. You're her favourite. She should go with you.

THENA

Nice try. You're the favourite. You take her.

MATS

She'd be so happy doing the mother-daughter thing. You could shop for purses.

THENA

Really? Purses? That's so sexist. Why couldn't you take her shopping for purses?

MATS

That's so homophobic. You can apologize by having her move in with you.

THENA

You get custody. I'll take her every second weekend if that helps. If she needs a purse, Amazon airdrops one right into her lap on the deck of her private cottage. In your compound. Where she lives happily ever after.

MATS

Why don't you take her?

THENA

For the same reason, I don't have a cat. I'm on the road even more than you are. The guys I run across can do a bit more than bust an eye out of your face.

MATS

(Repeats.)

Why don't you take her?

THENA

Imagine her tidying up my one-bedroom apartment. How long before she figures it out?

MATS

(Repeats THENA's earlier advice to him.)

You can't live your whole life keeping a secret like that from your mother.

THENA

It's not going to get her killed finding out you have a husband.

MATS

Easy for you to say. She's okay with you marrying a man.

THENA

You're the only one in a thousand galaxies who knows about my side gig. That's for a reason.

MATS

You think you're more famous than you are. Try living my life.

THENA

She starts blabbing to the ladies at Aqua-Divas that her daughter's into superhero cosplay. Or she does my laundry while I'm out. You know she'd do something like that.

MATS

So she thinks you like to play dress-up. Like when you were a kid. That's fun.

THENA

She hangs one of my pink capes off the balcony to air it out. And then there's two thousand super villains, bounty hunters and contract killers at your next game asking for your autograph.

MATS

Only two thousand? I get way more hate mail.

THENA

Here's the big sister speech. You tell Mom that David's your husband. Way better than me telling her he's your widow.

MATS

Fine. I'll talk to David.

(Lights down on MATS and THENA).

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.

(Lights up on MATS in his living room. He's upbeat.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Saturday June 15 and there's only four days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

(Lights up on THENA as she pulls on headphones.)

THENA

Sorry, I'm here. Hey Mats.

MATS

Can you help pack Mom? She's moving in. I talked with David last night.

THENA

That's terrific.

MATS

Seriously, I could use some big sister help on this. Will you be there when I tell her?

THENA

Glad to play the superhero swooping in at the last second to save the day.

MATS

You'll always be that big sister.

THENA

I signed up for this when I found you. I said 'I'm Thena'. And you started babbling.

MATS

Some things never change. To be fair, I would have been a baby.

THENA

I understood you. Talking nonsense. Still do.

MATS

I was saying ‘what are we going to do for a Mom?’ We didn’t know her yet.

THENA

Do you remember when she came for us?

MATS

Only the feelings of it. We’re waiting for her. We don’t know her. One day, she’s there.

THENA

You’re the cute one they want. I wouldn’t let anyone have you. Until I saw Mom standing in the crafts room. I knew her. I knew she should take us. And I let her.

MATS

How did you know?

THENA

I watched you and her. You drawing her in, making her love you. I knew then *why* she had come.

MATS

I didn’t know that part. Not then.

THENA

You’re a two-year old foundling. Under big sister protection.

MATS

The *ferocious* big sister whenever anyone came near me. You were a terror back then.

THENA

Yeah, I was. Still am when I need to be. But you had your own superpowers.

MATS

Basketball?

THENA

To make her love you, want to take care of you, for the rest of her life. And give me a break.

MATS

How do you know all this when you’re four?

THENA

Four with a superpowered brain.

MATS

Mom will move in with me. We’ll tell her together. You and me.

And David too.

THENA

Yes, and David.

MATS

(Lights down on MATS and THENA).

MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up & out.

(Lights up on NORA MAI mixing food.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Sunday June 16 and there's only three days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

(Lights up on THENA as she pulls on headphones.)

Hi Mom.

THENA

NORA MAI

Thena, have you talked to your brother? I want you both here for his birthday.

THENA

Just yesterday we spent the whole day talking about how wonderful it is to have you as our mom.

NORA MAI

Don't treat me like an idiot. Is he coming here on his birthday? I left him a message.

THENA

He's coming. Mom, do you remember seeing us for the first time?

NORA MAI

Of course I do. It's when my life began. It was like someone flipped a switch.

THENA

That was probably you turning on the oven.

NORA MAI

You were cheeky then too. I had a call saying you were ready and I could pick you up.

THENA

Tell me what you remember.

NORA MAI

Your brother was a toddler. You were all trouble. At the foundling sanctuary. It's gone now.

THENA

Tell me about meeting me.

NORA MAI

You know this story. I've told you a million times.

THENA

Tell me again.

NORA MAI

I saw you first. No one could miss you. You were running around the crafts room with a blanket over your head. When you bumped into things, you bounced up and ran faster. The teacher was chasing you. She wanted you to draw a picture of a tree. You refused.

THENA

Trees are for climbing. Drawing them is boring.

NORA MAI

Yes. That's what you told the teacher. 'I don't want to draw a tree.'

THENA

You heard me say that?

NORA MAI

I did. I asked you what you wanted to draw.

THENA

(Laughs.)

I said I wanted to draw my name. On my shirt. In pink glitter paint.

NORA MAI

The teacher said it wasn't allowed.

THENA

And then you said to the teacher—

THENA AND NORA MAI TOGETHER

'Why not, it's *my* shirt.'

THENA

You came over and said it was a nice shirt. It might look nicer with my name on it.

NORA MAI

The teacher said there was to be no painting on clothes.

THENA

I said 'everyone has paint on their painting smocks, why can't we have paint on our shirts?'

NORA MAI

The teacher was a nice lady but you were too much for her. I asked if I could help you paint. She said she had other kids who needed help painting trees and we could do whatever we wanted.

(Pauses. Silent while she gathers herself.)

THENA

Tell the rest of it.

NORA MAI

We went into the supply closet. I helped you take off your shirt. We put on your painting smock.

THENA

We went back to the painting table with my shirt. We put the shirt down flat.

NORA MAI

You traced out 'THENA' with a marker. We took some pink glitter paint and filled in the letters.

THENA

Tell the next part.

NORA MAI

Under your name, you traced the letters 'AND MATS'. I said 'who's Mats?'

THENA

I said he's my baby brother. You can be his mom too.

NORA MAI

And I told the lady I'd take him. And she said fine, I could have you both.

(Nora Mai stays silent.)

THENA

Mom, are you okay?

NORA MAI

There are different times in your life when you're a mother. The time *before* your kids. When it's just you. And the time when it's all *you and the kids*. I should remember that first time. I don't.

THENA

That other time doesn't matter to us. Or to you. Ever since we've known you, you've been Mom.

NORA MAI

I know things. I know I was made for this. For you. The moment I saw you. And him.

THENA

What do you know, Mom?

NORA MAI

That I'd be taking care of you two until the day I die. *(beat)* I've got to go. Something in the oven. Come with your brother for his birthday, okay?

(Lights down on NORA MAI and THENA.)

MUSIC: slide whistle or kazoo up & out.

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Monday June 17 and there's only one day left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday! Anyone else, leave a message. At the beep.
(Beep.)

ADMINISTRATOR

Thena, it's unusual to call with such news but I wanted to tell you myself. Please forgive me leaving you a message. But it's good news and I know you and your brother are anxious about it with his birthday coming.

(Takes a moment to check.)

Oh my goodness. I see it's tomorrow. The exemption application has been approved. It's been less than a week since we first chatted. So this is remarkably quick work. This is important to you—and our mutual friend—so I personally walked it through all seventy-seven levels of approval myself.

(Pause.)

Official documents to follow. But know this. Exemption is approved. Deregistration is permanently cancelled. I repeat, permanently cancelled. And now you, your mother and your brother—and our mutual friend—can celebrate on his birthday and look forward to a long life together courtesy of the FSS.

(Pause.)

I hope I'm not being too forward. But I'd like to wish your entire family a happy birthday for your brother.

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.

(Lights up on MATS in his living room. He's anxious.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Tuesday June 18 and it's the day you've been waiting for. Little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

(Lights up on THENA in a bathrobe.)

THENA

Hey Mats.

MATS

Just checking. When you going over? We should coordinate.

THENA

What? You bringing a hot casserole or something?

MATS

We should arrive around the same time. She made a big deal of us being there together.

THENA

I'm leaving in a few minutes.

MATS

I can't believe you got this done. The exemption. David's thrilled to have her moving in.

THENA

Does she know he does more than your taxes?

MATS

Not yet.

THENA

When?

MATS

Today. On my birthday. With your help, okay?

THENA

Sure. And moving in? She'll love it. You have a kitchen five times the size of my apartment.

MATS

So leaving when?

THENA

Now.

MATS

Me too.

(Lights down on THENA and MATS.)

(Lights up on NORA MAI's kitchen. NORA MAI isn't there. On the counter, a birthday cake, a small box gift-wrapped. NORA MAI's voice comes from her laptop, slightly delayed, as if at a distance.)

THENA (OFF)

Mom, where are you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Come into the kitchen, sweetie.

(THENA comes into view.)

THENA

Mom, where are you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I've put your brother's messaging app on my laptop. I usually don't care for AI but it's not bad.

(THENA looks at the laptop.)

THENA

So where are you now?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Outside. I'll explain when your brother gets here.

THENA

When did you make the cake?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

This morning. *(beat)* I think your brother's pulling into the parking just behind you.

THENA

No. I'd have seen him—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Wait a minute. Okay, here he comes. He's annoyed that you've taken the last visitor's spot.

MATS (OFF)

Hey Thena, how do you always snag the last parking spot? Mom? Where are you guys?

(A timer from the oven starts countdown.)

THENA

In the kitchen.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Thena, turn off the oven for me. I'm doing a roast. It has to rest.

(MATS comes into view.)

MATS

Where's Mom?

THENA

Outside. Probably at the recycling. She's talking through your message app on her laptop.

(MATS looks at the laptop.)

MATS

Hey, that's cool. It's buggy but fun, right Mom?

THENA

Why don't you come in, Mom? We're here.

MATS

(Playfully.)

Thena, maybe Mom's doing a surprise birthday party. Come out, come out, wherever you are!

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I won't be with you. I'm gone now. I wanted you both here today so you wouldn't argue about it.

THENA

(Suddenly alarmed.)

What do you mean gone?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I'm deregistered. That's what gone is for a MAI. After making the cake and getting the roast in the oven, I got it started.

MATS

Thena, you said this was cancelled—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Mats. Don't. This has nothing to do with your sister. Thena, I know what you were doing—

THENA

It was cancelled. Administrator left me a message yesterday—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Stop acting like children! This is *my life*. Not yours, Thena. Not yours, Mats. *Mine*.

MATS

Why?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Because it's your birthday. It's June 18, 2126, and my baby boy is twenty-one.

THENA

You didn't have to. We got the exemption—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

You are here so I can make sure you don't blame each other. Or yourself. I won't have any arguing between you.

MATS

Did you know what they were going to do? Until Thena stopped them.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

MAIs know all about deregistration. Our kids grow up, our friends get older. Except we don't change or age. And then we leave without ever saying goodbye. How could we not know?

THENA

I can't stand you being afraid and alone. Just waiting—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Waiting? I've gone outside. With the recycling so you don't have to cart me out like an old sofa.

THENA

They did this after they said they wouldn't.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

No one did anything to me. This is my decision. MAIs know how to do this. When it's time. It's my time today. If I can set the timer for a roast, I can manage a simple deregistration.

MATS

How can you be so sure? How can you know this is right?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I knew the moment I brought you home from the foundling sanctuary that my timer was set. Like eating a swirly chocolate and vanilla soft-ice cream. You taste it while it's melting into your sugar cone, making a mess of your life. It's not going to last but it's all you think about while it does. And then it's over.

(Chimes of files arriving. MATS and THENA both look at their devices.)

THENA

Mom, from you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

For both of you. I wrote out messages earlier. So that I'd get them right.

MATS

(Looking at his device.)

This is for Thena.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Sorry, technology sometimes gets the better of me.

THENA

Read it Mats.

MATS

(Reading.)

Thena, you are a flash of pink joy in the sky. Sometimes you're a birthday wish to a stranger. Sometimes, you're much more. I can't tell everyone how proud I am of my daughter, the call centre birthday wisher who still plays dress-up like she did as a girl racing around with a blanket pulled up over her head. I will keep our secrets secret until the day I die.

THENA

Mats, this is for you.

(Reading.)

Mats, I love that you have found love in your life. An accountant for a husband will keep you grounded. My sadness today is that I will miss cooking for you and David.

MATS

How? Thena?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

No long faces today. This is a birthday. It's almost twenty years since I got the call that made me the mother of my babies. Twenty years for you and a lifetime for me.

THENA

Mom, we can have more.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I'm glad you reminded me. Yes, there's more. The birthday present you and I made for Mats. It's on the counter.

(THENA picks up the gift box and hands it to MATS. He opens it. Inside a child's shirt with pink letters on it.)

MATS

A child's shirt? You've painted our names on it? 'THENA AND MATS.'

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Actually, your sister did. I just put it away for you. For this day. For the day when my children would be grown. And I'd say I was done.

(THENA reaches out for the shirt. MATS gives it to her.)

THENA

Mats, I didn't get you anything. I have nothing today.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

You have each other. And memories of me. And a roast. And birthday cake. Make sure to pack up the leftovers. Mats, take a slice of cake for David.

(END OF PLAY)

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES ABOUT NORA MAI

Nora Mai is a maternal autonomous interface, a MAI, an artificial human who presents as a mid-forties woman that is virtually indistinguishable from a human mom. Her programming directs her to perform the maternal duties of a loving but overbearing mother dedicated to managing every aspect of the lives of her children Thena and Mats until they reach the age of twenty-one.

MAIs are taken out of service by a routine end-of-life cycle process known as deregistration. When her youngest child Mats turns twenty-one in six days, Nora Mai will be shut down and put out for recycling.

Her programming was designed to make her unaware that she is an artificial life form and consequently unconcerned about any pending deregistration which the government manages as a routine product recall event. Not knowing what awaits them on their last day, much like a beloved pet doesn't know when it's going to be put to down, MAIs approach their last moments unconcerned. Except some MAIs have figured out what happens to them at the end of their useful lives as mothers and have taken matters into their own hands.

Nora Mai has cared for her children since they were assigned to her by the Foundling Sanctuary Service (FSS) when Thena was four and Mats was two. It is thought that FSS as an agency was shut down once foundlings were all assigned to MAIs to be raised in residential settings. Big tech companies have lucrative government contracts to supply a virtual army of MAIs to take care of children in government housing replicating family environments in local communities. Big tech also controls the recall of deregistered MAIs which are destroyed and creates the replacement MAIs needed to care for new children. The enforcement arm of FSS has been re-activated to deal with a growing public resistance to deregistration of MAIs.

Thena and Mats know their mother is a MAI. However, they have never spoken to her about her status as an artificial human because they believe she has no knowledge of her non-biological status. Nora Mai doesn't remember her life before taking custody of her children. She thinks of her life as beginning the day she picked them up at the Foundling Sanctuary.