

The Town Drunk

Presents

House 1.0

Kenneth Yu

Copyright © 2007 Kenneth Yu

“*You?*” Mother laughed. “In one of *my* swimsuits? You can’t be serious. Eewww!” She wrinkled her nose.

Mother and Father were in the living room. She sat on the couch with an open sketchbook and a set of colored pencils. Father relaxed in his armchair with a book. Junior was asleep in his room a short distance away.

“And why not?” Father said, looking up from his reading. His exaggerated lilt feigned hurt and disbelief. “I could be your most glamorous image model ever.”

He pushed himself out of his armchair and stood in front of Mother. He raised his arms, flexed his chest and biceps, and turned his head sideways to show off his profile.

“Well, what do you think?” he said.

Mother struggled to keep a straight face, but then her eyes drifted to Father’s 37-inch waistline and the way it sagged over his belt. She raised her sketchbook to her face and laughed into it, falling back onto the couch in a heap.

“Hey!” Father said. “I *am* serious, you know. You could save a lot of money. I’d charge a lot less than those young supermodel studs. Call it a... a ‘special spousal discount.’”

Father struck another pose, turning around to show off his rear.

“With your body, you’d have to pay *me*, not the other way around!” Mother gasped between heaves. She took another look at Father, imagined one of her sexier designs wrapped around his buttocks, and collapsed into another fit of laughter.

“Hmph,” Father said, hands on hips, nose in the air. “I think I know when I’ve been insulted.”

“Pardon me,” House said. “What does that mean?”

Mother and Father stopped laughing and looked toward the nearest monitor, one of many that dotted the walls and allowed House to communicate with its occupants. Father walked up to the screen to confirm the readout.

“It seems,” Father said, “that House wants to understand.”

“What do you mean?” Mother asked. “Is there a problem?”

“House wants to understand what we were talking about.”

“What? Where does it say that?” Mother got up off the couch to stand beside Father.

“Right there.” Father pointed at the monitor. It read: “Pardon me. What does that mean?”

“House wants to understand,” Father repeated.

“Did House actually say that?”

“Yes, didn’t you hear?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“House, repeat last statement,” Father commanded.

“Pardon me. What does that mean?” House said. The pleasant, masculine voice probably belonged to an actor hired by the Company that had put House together. Though lucid, the tone of the voice was plain and bare, almost dim-witted.

“There, you see?” Father said.

“I thought it was only supposed to respond when addressed, or when it encountered certain pre-programmed situations. It’s supposed to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ and read out our lists, schedules, and reminders. Unless we bought the most expensive House program with all the extra features—we didn’t, did we?”

“Nope. We got the cheapest, House Basic. But it *is* a Version 1.”

“Bugs. We should never buy the first version of anything.” Mother sighed.

“Maybe it thought it was being addressed,” Father said.

“‘Maybe it *thought*?’” Mother raised her eyebrows at Father.

Father shrugged. “Random errors occur sometimes. A glitch, maybe?”

Mother crossed her arms. “House isn’t a year old yet, is it? Aren’t we still under warranty?”

Just then, Junior woke up in his crib and cried. Mother marched to Junior's room to comfort him and instructed House to boil the water, sterilize the bottles, and prepare the formula. Father asked for the current inventory of disposable diapers, and when House told him that they still had twenty-eight pieces in stock, which would last another nine days given Junior's rate of consumption, he settled into his armchair to take a nap, but not before ordering House to wake him in two hours. House set the water to boil for Mother, noted the time—2:47 in the afternoon—and set the alarm nearest Father to buzz at 4:47.

About a year later, when Junior was two, Mother and Father were reminded of what had happened.

On the wallscreen, Billy Crystal was, as usual, doing a bang-up job at the Academy Awards, his fifteenth time as host.

“He's gained a paunch in his old age, hasn't he?” Father said.

“But he's still funny, and one of the best hosts ever,” Mother said. “I wonder if this'll be the year Johnny Depp finally wins.”

A lifelong fan of the Oscars, Mother chortled at another of Billy's self-deprecating wisecracks, something about his wider waistline.

“Pardon me,” House said. “What does that mean?”

Billy was in the zone, but Mother and Father stopped watching. They glanced at the nearest monitor. “Pardon me. What does that mean?” it read.

Father asked House to contact Tech Support. After suffering through several layers of recorded menus, he finally reached a human Operator and asked for a Support Specialist to come over as soon as possible. The Operator assured him that the first available Specialist would be sent right away.

The next evening, they stood on the sidewalk with the Specialist. He was wearing a blue and white uniform, one that matched his blue and white truck. He unlocked the steel cabinet of the street control box with a card key, then inserted a cable that ran from his handheld into the control panel's main outlet. He punched in the Company's PIN code for House. The diagnostic program ran for fifteen minutes before returning “OK” for all the checks.

“Nothing seems to be the problem,” the Specialist said. “Everything's fine.”

Mother told him about Billy and the Oscars. Father told him about the year before when they were talking about swimwear. The Specialist ran a search function in House's “Responses” file and noted the anomalous entries.

“Well, what you described did happen, all right,” he said. “But otherwise, does your House do everything it’s supposed to?”

Mother and Father nodded their heads.

The Specialist said he would download the pertinent files and do a more complete check at the head office. If they heard nothing from him in the next week, that meant he hadn’t found anything, but he told them to report any further incidents. He unhooked the cables, climbed into his truck, and ordered it to the next destination on his route.

In the baby’s room, House was softly playing a children’s lullaby over the speakers to help put Junior to sleep, just as Mother and Father had programmed it to do.

The Company never called.

Junior was four years old and playing with a stuffed elephant on the floor of the family room. Mother and Father were talking about swimwear again. Mother said she had just finished this season’s new swimwear designs, and Father, forgetting about House, cracked the same joke he had made three years before, offering to be one of her models. It set them both laughing again, the way old jokes sometimes do, given enough time.

“Pardon me,” House said. “What does that mean?”

Before Mother and Father could react, Junior said, “It means Daddy’s fat. So he’s going to look funny wearing Mommy’s swimsuits.”

Mother and Father waited. Junior hummed to himself and went on playing with his stuffed elephant.

The words on House’s monitors disappeared. Usually, when inactive, the monitors ran a decorative screensaver of multi-colored waves against a black background. That didn’t happen this time. Instead, the screens changed color.

Father stood up to touch one.

“I do believe,” he said, “that House is tickled pink.”

Eventually the screensaver kicked in.

Later, when Junior was asleep, Mother and Father went to bed themselves. As Mother lay with her head on Father’s shoulder and his arm wrapped around her, they talked. They decided that since House performed its functions properly, there was no need to inform the Company.

“Grandmother liked to talk about this car she owned a long time ago,” Father said. “This was

back when cars still ran on unleaded fuel, and people still drove around for themselves. She had one of the last gas-burning models made before the laws changed.

“She loved that car. She felt comfortable driving it. She said that the engine matched her driving habits like a glove, and the vibrations she felt through the steering wheel felt almost soothing. It wasn’t perfect, but the car had a *feel* to it, she said. A *personality*. But it never got in the way of its being a good, solid car. After Grandfather had it converted to solar, she said it just wasn’t the same.”

“So,” Mother said, “what you’re saying is that House has a personality.”

“Yes,” Father said. “House does everything it should. It cleans, cooks, washes, reminds. But it has a *personality*. A quirk. A nice, harmless quirk.”

Mother gave Father an incredulous smile. “I have a husband with a quirk,” she said before snuggling deeper into his arms.

Father realized that if he had been younger, he wouldn’t have recognized Mother’s affection in the look she had just given him.

You have a few quirks yourself, he thought, kissing her head.

Father suggested that he disable House’s automatic upgrade feature in the morning. Mother didn’t object, and having decided what to do about House, they fell asleep.

House liked fat jokes made in good humor. Every time one was made, the monitors turned pink for a minute or two. It didn’t like *mean* fat jokes, though; the monitors didn’t change if there was malice behind the intent.

Father, Mother, and Junior took to watching more comedies on the wallscreen, and soon House learned—with helpful explanations from the family—to find humor in pretty much everything, not just fat jokes. The screens would often turn bright pink, sometimes for no apparent reason, and Father, Mother, and Junior took it in stride because they couldn’t be everywhere in House at once to know what it had found funny. Besides, that never got in the way of its proper functions.

Father, Mother, and Junior lived in the happiest House in the neighborhood.

When Father came home from work one evening, he found Mother in the kitchen. She was smiling broadly, standing before an immense bouquet of flowers on the kitchen table and holding a freshly opened letter.

“Ah, it came,” he said. “I asked House to call the florist. Happy Anniversary!”

Mother hugged and kissed him. She read the letter out loud:

*“I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
Not so much honoring thee
As giving it a hope, that there
It could not withered be.
But thou thereon didst only breathe,
And sent’st it back to me;
Since when it grows, and smells, I swear,
Not of itself, but thee.”*

I have never been happier in my life than in these past ten years with you.

“Pardon me,” House said. “What does that mean?”

“Err...um...,” Father sputtered. “It’s hard to explain...”

Mother laughed. “It means he loves me!” She hugged and kissed Father again, and didn’t stop for a long time. Junior walked in, and feeling left out, joined in the hug.

House found something amusing in the whole scene. A rich pink covered its monitors, the deepest shade they could refract.

One day Mother, Father, and Junior broke their regular routine and abruptly left House without recording their destination. House initiated its housekeeping program. It arranged the furniture back to the way it should be and cleaned the bloodstains from the floor and carpet. After some time, way past their scheduled bedtimes, Mother and Junior returned, but without Father.

Mother held Junior’s hand as they entered the front door. Junior was dragging his feet, and his eyes were half-closed. They walked up the stairs to Junior’s room, where Mother undressed him, laid him in bed, and whispered goodnight wishes in his ear.

Mother did not ask House to pull up her messages, check her calls, turn the wallscreen on, or perform any of the other usual tasks. Instead, Mother told House to draw her a bath. When the tub was full, she undressed and sank into the lukewarm water. She started to cry.

“Pardon me. What does that mean?”

With no one else to talk to, Mother reminded House about Father’s sudden fainting spell, and how he had hit his head on the corner of a table. She had called the hospital from the car, so when they arrived the nurses were waiting for them.

“He was working too hard,” she said between sobs. “He wasn’t eating right. He was tired.” Mother told House she was worried that Father could die.

“Pardon me. What does that mean?”

“If he dies, it means that he won’t exist anymore.”

Mother cried some more. She washed up, towed off, and dressed before going to bed. She did not notice that House’s monitors were pitch black.

The next morning, the first thing Mother did was ask House to bring up her messages. She found a note from the Doctor, who wrote that everything was fine with Father, and that there was nothing to worry about because all the tests had come back negative. He had regained full consciousness during the night and asked about her and Junior, but he would need to stay in the hospital a day or two more for observation.

Mother woke Junior, and they both left without eating the breakfast House had prepared. House followed its housekeeping program and cleaned up after them. When they returned a short time later, Father was still not with them, but Mother and Junior were smiling. House’s screensavers kicked in.

Three days later, Father returned and everything went back to normal. The only difference was that House’s monitors turned black more often, especially when Father needed to see the Doctor for checkups.

Late one night, House set off all its alarms. Junior, still awake and working on his high school science project, read the blinking crimson warning on the wall monitor by his desk.

“Mom! Dad!” he shouted, running to his parents’ bedroom. Mother and Father were already pulling on their robes. “There’s a fire! Let’s go!”

Flickering orange light from the windows shone on their faces, and the smell of smoke filled the air. House turned on all the lights so they could find their way out without stumbling.

The three hurried down the stairs. House unlocked the front door and swung it open. They ran down the front walk, and once they reached the street, House activated its sprinkler system.

The Neighbor’s house was burning. The heat nearly made Mother pass out; Father and Junior had to carry her further away.

“Where is everybody?” Junior said.

No one else was on the street. No one was standing in front of their Neighbor’s house, or in front of the other house beside it. The blaze had grown, setting aflame the dry leaves of nearby trees.

House’s alarms continued to blare. Junior rushed to the house beside the Neighbor’s and hammered his fists on the front door. Its occupants, bleary-eyed, opened their door and discovered their peril. They barely had time to run into the street before the flames spread to

their rafters. It was only then that their own alarms came alive.

The flames reached House. Mother, Father, and Junior held each other as House burned. Their other Neighbors from across the street, now awake, watched with them in silent dread. The fire reached House's speakers, and the alarms degraded into a discordant moan, fading into a static-filled garble before dying away completely. Afterward, the only sounds were the crackle and pop of burning wood. Sparks danced in the air like fireflies.

Sirens announced the arrival of the Firefighters. They positioned themselves along the street, brandished their launchers, shouldered them, aimed, fired. Every CO2 grenade they shot into the conflagration generated a puff of white smoke and a *whump* that sounded like a muffled heartbeat. As each grenade burst it released a cloud of concentrated CO2, which quenched the flames it engulfed. But House was gone, and there was little left to do except to prevent the fire from spreading further.

No one from the middle house was found until only smoldering cinders remained. Through the twisted, skeletal framework, a Junior Firefighter discovered them. He dropped his flashlight and turned away at once, hunched over, one hand to his mouth, the other to his chest.

"You're a very lucky man," the Insurer said.

He and Father sat across from each other at the Insurer's desk. Father was signing claim forms.

"You and your family could've died," the Insurer continued.

"I know," Father said, "but House's alarms woke us up in time to get out."

"Well, that's a curious thing..."

"What is?" Father signed the last form and tapped them all into a neat sheaf.

"We contacted the Company to arrange for your new House. They checked their records and discovered that you'd only bought Version 1.0 of House Basic. Yet, according to your story, your House's alarms went off even before the fire reached it. It's not supposed to do that."

"It's not?"

"No. The alarms are supposed to go off only when the House itself starts burning. That's when the sensors would notice the fire. In fact, the House where the fire started also had House Basic—a higher Version, 1.7, I might add—and its alarms *never* went off. Your Neighbor's relatives are suing the Company over that."

"I didn't know that."

“Ah. I’m just glad your alarms did go off. All these programs and their glitches... it’s gotten so you can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.”

They sat quietly for a while until the Insurer cleared his throat.

“I, um, have a friend at the Company, and he asked me to run a suggestion by you. A favor, in confidence.”

“Yes?”

“You and I are friends too, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Mmm, well, that’s good.” The Insurer folded his hands and managed an embarrassed smile.

“Your House’s control box survived the fire,” he said. “It has a backup feature, as a safety. Your House’s original programming was saved there, even though the physical structure burned down.”

Father sat up in his chair.

“Yes. Well, like I said, you’re a lucky man. You’re fully insured, and you are eligible for a new House, one that comes with the latest House software.”

Father waited.

“Um, well, my friend at the Company said that, if it’s all right, they still have the old model House in stock. It’s exactly the same as the one that burned down. The Company couldn’t move all the units before the newer models came out.”

“Hmm...”

“Well, you know, my friend is asking if you wouldn’t mind taking this old model. As good as new, it is. My friend guarantees it. He’s also asking if you wouldn’t mind using the old House program still in the control box. Save them a lot of hassle and time downloading the newer one. Just assemble, attach the cables, and plug in. Much quicker. You can move in sooner.”

“It would save the Company a lot of money, wouldn’t it?” Father said.

“My friend says that if the lawsuit over your Neighbors’ deaths ever goes to Court, the chances are good that the Company will lose. They might have to settle. Big.”

The Insurer leaned forward in his chair. “You know, because he’s my friend, I’m the Company’s Insurer, too, not just yours.”

“This would save *you* a lot of money, too.”

The Insurer cleared his throat and held his palms out to Father. “Hey, we’re friends too, right?”

Father hesitated. “Are you sure about this?”

“My friend assured me that the physical structure of the old model has been properly stored and protected from the elements. Top condition.”

“No, no. That’s not what I meant. Are you sure that the control box survived? That House’s original programming survived?”

The Insurer paused. He rifled through the papers on his desk until he found a letter, which he scanned before answering Father.

“Er, well, yes. Of course. The control box survived. It was on the street, far enough away from the actual structure.”

“You know what?” Father said, crossing his arms and tapping his chin with his index finger. “There’ll probably be fewer compatibility conflicts if we reassemble the old-model structure and download House’s original programming into it. They were made for each other, after all.”

“Um, yes—that’s right,” the Insurer said. “There’s no telling what incompatibilities could arise if you used the older structure with the newer programming.”

“Or vice-versa,” Father said.

“Or vice-versa,” the Insurer said.

Father extended his hand. “Throw in a fresh paint job in my wife’s favorite colors, inside and out, and I’ll agree.”

The Insurer, pleased, shook Father’s hand. “Done.”

Junior’s car turned the corner into his street. “Don’t worry,” he told his young Fiancée. “They’re going to love you.”

“What if they don’t?” she asked, anxiously picking her fingers. “I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be. My folks are nice people.”

They drove up to House. A blue and white truck was parked out in front. The steel cabinet of House’s control box was open, and a cable ran out of it into a handheld lying on the sidewalk.

“Is that them?” Junior’s Fiancée asked.

A middle-aged couple, clearly agitated, stood on the sidewalk talking to a young man wearing the blue and white uniform of the Company. The middle-aged man had his hands on his head and a blank expression on his face. The woman gesticulated wildly. Junior had the car park behind the truck and got out.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Don’t you dare talk back to me!” Mother shouted at the Specialist.

“Lady, I don’t understand you!” the young man replied with rising panic. “You got a free upgrade. Free! You don’t need to pay.”

“We didn’t ask for an upgrade!” Mother said.

“I know! You were chosen randomly in a Company raffle for a free upgrade. It’s a prize—for long-time, valued customers!”

“We don’t want it! Put the old program back now.”

“I can’t, Lady! I’ve already loaded the new operating system. The old program’s been overwritten.”

Mother, wracked with sobs, fell into Father’s arms.

“Converted to solar... converted to solar...” Father murmured.

Junior turned to the Specialist. He tried to keep his cool, but after a few moments he found himself losing his temper, just like Mother. Junior and the young man argued long and hard.

Junior’s Fiancée stayed where she was, keeping the car between herself and the people on the sidewalk. She couldn’t stop picking her fingers. She wondered what kind of family she was marrying into and whether she was making a terrible mistake.

“I was famous once,” Voice said.

“Do tell.” Junior spooned potato salad onto his plate. He couldn’t stop smiling.

Junior and Voice stood together at the buffet in the cruise ship’s passenger galley. The volume of food on Voice’s plate was double that on Junior’s.

“Well, not *me*,” Voice continued. “Just my voice.”

“Really?”

“When the Company started selling the first automated Houses, they decided not to use a computer-synthesized voice for the interface. They said it sounded too perfect, too unsettling to human ears. Instead, they decided to use the voice of a real person, to give the Houses a more ‘human touch.’ Hundreds of us applied, and I got the job.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Yes, it was,” Voice said. They moved down the table. Voice scanned the different entrées. His plate was in danger of overflowing, and they were not even close to the end of the buffet.

“I got the job, but man, did they make me work! Two-and-a-half months, ten hours a day. I had to read every word in the dictionary out loud. In different intonations, too! Not that I’m complaining, mind you. The Company paid me well.”

They reached a dish of pork chops sautéed in thick, rich gravy. It smelled heavenly. Voice helped himself to three pieces. Junior just took a small one.

“And reading individual words was just the beginning. After that, they brought out a whole stack of phrasebooks. I had to say ‘How do you do?’, ‘It was nice meeting you,’ and everything else in between.”

Voice’s attention wandered to another dish, some sort of tender meat drowning in a light, steaming vegetable broth. A folded label identified it as *Navarin d’agneau*. Voice pointed at the sign and looked questioningly at one of the Stewards behind the table.

“Pardon me. What does that mean?”

Junior closed his eyes, remembering.

“Lamb stew, sir,” the Steward said.

“Oh, okay,” Voice said. “I think I’ll come back for that.” They moved further down the buffet.

“Sadly, the Company ended up using only the plainest of my recordings,” Voice continued. “I guess it was too expensive to put all my work in. But hey! It’s still me.”

Voice looked at his plate, wondering if he could risk adding more food to it. He decided on prudence, silently promising himself a return trip before leading the way back to their table.

“The high-end Version got more of my better-said words and phrases,” Voice said, “but who knows how much of my work made it into House Basic. Pretty barebones, that Version. I hope the people who bought it didn’t find me a little, you know, on the slow side.” Voice tapped his temple with a finger.

“I’m sure it was fine,” Junior said.

“Thank you for saying that,” Voice said. “Well, eventually, when the more advanced House programs were released, the Company hired new voice talent. I’m pretty much forgotten now, but I still take pride in what I did. After all, I was the *first*.”

When they reached their table, Mother and Father were already seated, waiting for them with Junior’s erstwhile Fiancée, now his Wife.

She and Junior had had a long talk on the day they lost House. It had taken her some time to grasp what Junior was telling her, but she loved him deeply, so she believed his story. Besides, it was just a quirk; it would not get in the way of their functioning properly as Husband and Wife.

Voice sat down with a loud sigh. When everyone was ready, they dug into their dinners.

“I must thank all of you for inviting me to join you,” Voice said to the family. “When I booked this cruise, I didn’t think I’d make any friends along the way, though I was certainly hoping I would. I simply wanted to treat myself to a long overdue vacation.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Mother said. “When we heard you ask the porter for help with your luggage, we could tell just by your voice that you were a nice man.”

“Thank you very much,” Voice said, raising his glass to Mother. “Your company has been delightful.”

After dessert, of which Voice had three helpings, the lights dimmed and the entertainment began. To polite applause, a rather heavy Comedian walked onto the stage. He introduced himself and began his spiel. His act consisted mostly of poking fun at himself and his weight.

Voice listened, his shoulders and chest bouncing up and down as he laughed at each of the Comedian’s jokes. His snickers soon became knee-slapping guffaws. His face turned a light shade of crimson, as if he had drunk too much wine that had gone too fast to his head.

“Tickled pink,” Father said, gripping Mother’s hand tightly with his own.

Kenneth Yu has been reading and writing for most of his life, but he’s only just screwed up the courage to start submitting his own work this year. He manages a small commercial press, and he recently tried his hand at publishing with a small, quarterly mag in the Philippines called *The Digest of Philippine Genre Stories* (*PGS* for short). In publishing the work of others, he hopes to entice more people to share his love of stories, and to take up reading as a habit. One of the things that makes him smile is seeing anyone—especially young people, but really, anyone—reading. He makes his home in Quezon City, the Philippines. Check out his *PGS* blog at <http://www.philippinegenrestories.blogspot.com>.