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TURING TEST

A One Act Play by

DAN MORRA

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SYNOPSIS
Based on the premise of computer pioneer Alan Turing, the focus of an experiment is a unique one: determining which of the “people” present is an artificial intelligence, an AI. Is it the somewhat haughty and aggravating male, the likeable but fragile female or ...?

CHARACTERS
1F /2M / 1 Either

DR. ROSSUM – F or M; project director; distinguished looking but surprisingly informal and projecting an air of suave smugness

MARIA – young, smart, and apparently vulnerable

TRENT – appears to be a bit older than Maria; just as smart and not at all vulnerable; somewhat haughty

MR. CARMAN – mid to late 20’s; thoughtful; initially he is slightly overwhelmed by implications of the experiment but later he is appalled

SETTING
A Conference Room
TURING TEST
by Dan Morra

SETTING:  A conference room at a university; an experiment in progress.

AT RISE:  Two individuals, MARIA and TRENT are seated at a table. A purse is on the table beside MARIA. The door opens and DR. ROSSUM enters accompanied by MR. CARMAN who is the subject of the experiment. MARIA and TRENT rise. DR. ROSSUM makes introductions.

ROSSUM
Maria, Trent, this is our … what shall we call you … our subject?  No, no, our investigator, Mr. Carman.

ROSSUM, Continued
CARMAN shakes hands with MARIA and TRENT as ROSSUM watches intently.

ROSSUM, Continued
Now please, have a seat.

ROSSUM, Continued
ALL comply.

ROSSUM, Continued
Well, Mr. Carman, I’m sure you’re dying – figuratively of course – to know why you are here. As an intelligent individual, you must have inferred that the nature of the solicitation involved some sort of experiment. And perhaps our location in the university’s robotics institute was an equally significant clue. To come right to the point, we are here today to conduct a test, more specifically the Turing Test. You’re not, by chance, familiar with it, are you?

ROSSUM
I remember reading something about a Turing test when I started college. It had something to do with computers, didn’t it?

ROSSUM
It had everything to do with computers. As formulated by noted computer pioneer Alan Turing in 1950, the test was a way of answering the question, “Do computers think?”  His premise was quite insightful: if a computer, in interacting with a human, could convince that individual that he or she was in fact interacting with a person then the computer was indeed thinking. Turning set the bar rather low – at 30% initially. In other words, if the computer could convince three out of ten sentient beings that they were dealing with a person rather
ROSSUM, Continued
than a machine then that machine was indeed capable of genuine thought. To be completely honest Turing later adjusted his criteria, but the principle of that human-like interaction remains valid. So, we are here today, seven decades later, to take the next logical step -- to see if you can differentiate human from non-human…face to face, as it were.

CARMAN
I….I don’t un—

ROSSUM
Believe it or not, Mr. Carman, one of the individuals sitting across from you isn’t.

CARMAN
Isn’t what?

ROSSUM
Isn’t human.

CARMAN
You mean, you mean, one of them is a robot?

ROSSUM
Robot is such an imprecise term that we try to avoid using it. And to be truthful, everyone has his or her own individual perception of what exactly constitutes a robot… Gort, R2-D2, the Bubble Headed Booby from Lost in Space… We prefer the term “artificial intelligence” when referring to any humanly constructed alternate thinking machine. But, you are correct; one of these individuals is not human.

ROSSUM stares at them.

Are you serious?

CARMAN

ROSSUM
Yes, I am. And as you can see, you will be unable to determine that based on physical appearance. We have gone to great lengths to house our artificial intelligence in a human form. Frankly, that form, the hardware as it were, was not as challenging as the software, or operating system. We’ve proven rather convincingly that acting human is far more difficult than looking that way. Now, just so we understand, you may not resort to any sort of extreme physical contact to help you determine the AI – artificial intelligence. So if you are tempted to physically threaten or hit either Maria or Trent please think better of it. Doing so would not only invalidate the test but could result in severe injury; to act truly human AI’s must be endowed with all human characteristics – everything from mannerisms to emotions to a sense of self-preservation. Consequently, should you decide to “throw a punch” at our AI he or she will almost certainly respond according to typical human behavior patterns. And we’re really not interested to trying to explain to the administration how the room got trashed and one of our paid participants ended up in the hospital with a broken nose.
CARMAN

But … but …

ROSSUM

But?

CARMAN

They…they look so real.

ROSSUM

Thank you, from myself and the rest of the team. *(Walks around the table)* We really haven’t established any definitive protocols for your inquiry; however,

What?

ROSSUM

Protocols….we haven’t made any specific restrictions on your discussion. You may talk about whatever you want. Maria and Trent will, no doubt, be cordial and responsive – as would any human participant. Any questions?

CARMAN

How long…how long do I have?

ROSSUM

Excellent question. The original Turing tests ranged from 15 minutes to half an hour. You’re the final investigator in our first test run and so far we’ve found everyone is quite content with the 15-minute time limit.

ROSSUM turns to leave.

CARMAN

Wait! *(ROSSUM stops)* I…I’m not sure I can do this.

ROSSUM

Really? Why not? You’re a reasonably intelligent young man with a sincere appreciation of technology and the science behind it. You are, in fact, an ideal investigator.

CARMAN

But what if I can’t tell? I mean, the others who have taken the test have they –

ROSSUM

It’s not a competition, Mr. Carman. In fact, it’s more like a service. To play a truly meaningful role in the future of humanity an AI must not only look human and, based on its programming, act human; it must be capable of the autonomy of a human. In other words, it must be able to respond to novel stimuli and unique situations. Even more importantly, it must wholeheartedly accept itself as human. In doing so it will be transformed into a
ROSSUM, Continued

wondrous being -- one capable of acting with conviction and certitude and ultimately taking its rightful place in the world. And that, Mr. Carman, is what we want you to help us prove.

ROSSUM turns and exits; CARMAN stares at each of them individually for a few seconds then they glance at each other. TRENT shrugs.

CARMAN

I, ah, guess I’m supposed to say something – to ask questions, I mean. You’re Ok with that I guess?

TRENT nods.

MARIA

Sure, shoot.

CARMAN turns his head slightly.

CARMAN

That’s a very colloquial expression. Would an AI know that?

MARIA

I don’t know; I know it.

TRENT

I know it, too….I don’t use it much, however. I, I think it’s because of our penchant for being leery of anything related to firearms. I think society has become much more … cautious about some of the words we use.

MARIA

Really?

CARMAN

You don’t think so?

MARIA

I don’t know; some words maybe. I guess I think we’re almost schizophrenic in some ways.

TRENT

How?

MARIA

Well, we obsess about things like sports team names regarded as ethnic slurs but routinely tolerate words that previous generations would have found grossly offensive.
CARMAN

Such as?

MARIA

You know, things like “suck.” This sucks, he sucks, people say it all the time. And other stuff, too. What about boobs?

TRENT

I’m in favor of them – but that’s just me.

*MARIA casts him a wry glance.*

MARIA

You know what I mean.

CARMAN

But there are other words –

MARIA

Yes, but they weren’t used in everyday conversation, polite conversation anyway.

TRENT

So what do you think this means?

Means?

TRENT

Signifies. That contemporary society is more tolerant?

CARMAN

*(Interjecting)*

In some ways I believe it does; my mother told me that when she was young she couldn’t dare date a man of a different race. What about your parents?

MARIA

What?

CARMAN

Well, did they ever tell you any stories about prejudice or conflicts over social norms?

*MARIA pauses thoughtfully.*

MARIA

No, no I don’t believe they did. That’s …. strange, isn’t it?

TRENT

Yes, either they never experienced or observed it or…
CARMAN
Or what – that she didn’t really have parents?

TRENT
Well, that’s one possibility, but I was going to say that perhaps they simply lived an isolated, idyllic existence devoid of fear.

CARMAN
How likely is that?

MARIA
Perhaps it depends on how you define isolated and devoid of fear.

*CARMAN stands and walks around the table.*

CARMAN
(To TRENT)
What about your parents? Did they also live a blissful life?

*TRENT stares at CARMAN then slowly cracks a smile.*

TRENT
Yes…just as blissful and idyllic as hers.

CARMAN
You’re just saying that, aren’t you?

TRENT
Obviously; you heard it, didn’t you? I’m almost certain I said it, but if I didn’t and just imagined I did that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m not the AI. An intuitive programmer would make occasional self-doubt a part of any human-imitation sub-routine, wouldn’t he?

MARIA
Or she.

CARMAN
You’re toying with me, aren’t you? If you mimic her answers then there’s no way for me to compare, no way to say which is more believably human.

TRENT
Or our experiences, at least in this one instance, are quite similar.

*CARMAN walks around the table.*

CARMAN
Do you like games?
TRENT
Me? Of course; games involve competition and we’re all pro…predisposed to compete. If we weren’t humankind wouldn’t have survived. We’re not the swiftest or the strongest or the most agile or the best disguised.

MARIA
But we are the smartest…allegedly.

CARMAN
How about you?

MARIA
Games? I like some…not ones that involve extreme physical violence, but I enjoy ones that are intellectually challenging like word games, logic puzzles.

CARMAN
How do you define physical violence?

MARIA
Hitting of course.

TRENT
Baseball?

MARIA
No, hitting one another…you know, boxing, MMA…

TRENT
Football?

MARIA
Yes, I mean no, I mean I…I’m ambivalent about football.

CARMAN
Why? Disliking football is almost un-American…

TRENT
Or almost un-human.

She casts him an icy, albeit uncomfortable, stare.

MARIA
I—I do not appreciate…like the idea of people hurting one another.

TRENT
Even if they do so willingly?
MARIA
(Irately)
Would you kindly shut up! He is supposed to ask the questions.

TRENT
I’m not sure that’s true….As I understand it, Mr. Carman’s only directive is to determine which of us is human. Isn’t that correct?

CARMAN
Yes it is. (Approaching) You know, Trent, if you’re not human you’re an incredible creation.

TRENT
And if I am?

CARMAN
You’re an incredible jerk and she’d be entirely justified punching you in the mouth.

TRENT
But if I’m the human then she’s the AI. I always thought AI’s weren’t allowed to harm humans.

MARIA
That’s one of Asimov’s Laws of Robotics…I admit his three laws have been generally accepted in fiction, but we’re not fictional characters – neither of us.

CARMAN
Wait…that’s very interesting.

MARIA
How so? It’s obvious we’re tangible –

CARMAN
No, no, the implication.

MARIA
I don’t understand.

CARMAN
Do you understand, Trent?

TRENT
Perhaps…enlighten me.

CARMAN
Well, if one of you is an AI do you know it? I mean, does the AI realize that it’s the AI and the other one is human?
Well, I know I’m human.

And I’m human, too.

So one of us is lying.

And if that’s true, then—

Then Dr. Rossum has done a remarkable job of creating an AI that mimics human behavior. Isn’t that what you’re here to prove?

But that’s only part of it…the least frightening part.

Frightening? How?

Think about it…If you’re not lying, you must believe what you’re saying is true. Which means --

Which means that one of us has achieved a form of sentience – the ultimate scientific accomplishment of the last century. Amazing, isn’t it?

Do, do you think that’s actually possible? I mean, I, I don’t think I’m an AI. I have complete memories of events, achievements, relationships. I have plans, expectations, even dreams. It’s not possible they all could have been fabricated, programmed into me…is it?

I don’t know. What do you think, Trent?

I think she is very effective at manipulating the situation to elicit an emotional response on your part. The question is whether you will be duped by it.

So you have no doubts?
TRENT
I have numerous doubts … whether it will rain tomorrow or merely be overcast, whether my
favorite football team will ever have a viable NFL-caliber quarterback, whether the
governing parties will ever go beyond partisan bickering to enact meaningful
legislation…But I don’t doubt my own …

CARMAN

Humanity?

MARIA continues pacing and is
obviously anxious. CARMAN notices her;
TRENT does likewise.

CARMAN, Continued
Maria… (No response) Maria. (She turns) What’s wrong?

MARIA
You don’t get it, do you? You don’t understand the implications… I think I’m human and
he thinks he’s human, too. But if one of us isn’t telling the truth but doesn’t realize it then –

TRENT
Then the human race is doomed.

CARMAN

What?

MARIA
Think about it. Could a sentient AI be allowed to roam free among humans? She –

TRENT
Or he…

MARIA
Would have superior mental abilities, possibly physical abilities, too. That would lead to
superior achievement and ultimately domination of humanity.

CARMAN
A single AI could not dominate the world.

TRENT
Single humans have tried – and at times come very close.

CARMAN

That’s preposterous.

TRENT
Is it? A charismatic leader in the right economic situation and the proper geopolitical climate
could gain a great following.
CARMAN
But not maintain control…over humans.

MARIA
The AI wouldn’t have to…Humans are more than willing to control each other when given half a chance.

CARMAN
But one AI, no matter how advanced, couldn’t control the whole world.

What if there is more than one?

MARIA
An army of AI’s. I don’t believe it. Why?

TRENT
To make the world better than it is. Maybe the AI creators are cynics, certain that humanity has mucked everything up beyond human ability to repair it. So let a more evolved being take a shot.

MARIA
We can’t let that happen….we have to stop it, stop it now.

TRENT
I don’t agree with your hypothesis, but I’ll play along just for fun. How?

(To CARMAN, forcefully)
MARIA
You have to destroy us.

What?

MARIA
If you destroy us, both of us, then the experiment is over.

CARMAN
You mean kill you? Me?

TRENT
That’s ridiculous; first of all, he wouldn’t be able to do it. And second, even if he did – and we for some insane reason let him – they would just make another AI.

MARIA
But it would slow them down at least, give humanity more time to prepare.
TRENT
Prepare? Prepare for what – an AI takeover that they would never know about?

MARIA
He could tell them; he could tell them everything, arouse suspicion, get an investigation started.

CARMAN
I…I couldn’t –

MARIA
Couldn’t what, risk exposing yourself to possible ridicule and derision – even for the sake of all humanity? *(Rushes to his side)* Look, I know it would be hard and almost no one would believe you, at least at first. But you have to try. You’re our last hope --- our only hope.

ROSSUM sweeps in enthusiastically, a piece of paper in hand. *TRENT, MARIA, and CARMAN assume a guise of composure.*

ROSSUM
How are we doing?

CARMAN
Fine…everything’s going very well.

ROSSUM
I’m delighted to hear that. Sorry to interrupt, but I need your signature and wanted to make sure I didn’t forget, so I thought I’d better get it now.

ROSSUM lays the paper before CARMAN.

CARMAN
This is …?

ROSSUM
An authorization for payment. I know you already signed a release and an IRS withholding form, but the university needs to exact its ream of cellulose as well.

CARMAN glances at the form.

CARMAN
Oh, oh OK.

He checks his pocket for a pen, unsuccessfully then glances at ROSSUM who checks for a pen.
ROSSUM

*(Not finding a pen)*
My, my, talk about the absent-minded professor.

*M aria opens her purse, dumps the contents out on the table, sorts through them. She locates a pen and offers it to CARMAN. He takes it a bit hesitantly and signs. ROSSUM swipes it away.*

ROSSUM, *Continued*
Thank you, so much. Just a few more minutes and the session will be over so make sure to ask your most challenging questions soon.

ROSSUM turns and exits.

*M aria*
Well?

CARMAN
Well what?

*M aria*
Are you going to do it?

CARMAN
Do what – kill you?

TRENT
Interesting – you said kill, she said destroy. I wonder why.

*M aria*
That’s right, I did say destroy; I said it twice. Why would I say that if I meant kill? That’s not the right way to phrase it…unless…

CARMAN
Unless you’re not human….Look, it doesn’t matter. I am not going to kill, destroy or harm you in any way. Either of you.

*M aria*
But what if this is the ultimate test, the last chance to act?

CARMAN
I’m not a murderer, under any circumstances…I’m a paid research subject, that’s all. This, this whole scenario is, is preposterous. In fact, it’s so utterly ridiculous …

*M aria*
What?
CARMAN
It’s so ridiculous it’s hard to believe it’s spontaneous. I mean, no humans would ever jump to the conclusion that they are rob–AI’s based on such flimsy evidence.

TRENT
I’m not jumping to any conclusions. I know I’m human. In fact….

TRENT reaches across and pulls something from the pile of purse contents. It is a lighter; he flicks it to generate a flame which he admires.

TRENT, Continued
I’m willing to prove it.

TRENT holds the lighter close to his hand. MARIA knocks it away.

MARIA
Stop it; that won’t prove anything.

She flexes her hand and rubs it.

TRENT
Really? Wouldn’t an expected human reaction be a scream of pain?

(Continuing to rub her hand)
You could fake that.

TRENT
So nothing less than the smell of seared flesh will satisfy you? My, you are quite the ghoulish AI, aren’t you? (To CARMAN) What say you, Mr. Carman? Is she real or an imposter?

CARMAN moves to her side.

CARMAN
Are you all right?

He tries to inspect her hand. She pulls it away.

MARIA
I’m fine.
CARMAN

(Reaches again for her hand)
I thought I saw blood.

TRENT

No fair, no fair; no physical contact.

CARMAN

(Turning quickly)
Why not?

(Tre surprised)
Because….if you’re allowed to paw her the next thing you’ll want is to touch me to compare. I—I’m not comfortable with that.

CARMAN stares at TRENT then turns back to MARIA.

Are you sure you’re OK?

MARIA

Positive. Go on with your questions. We have to know the truth.

TRENT rises quickly and shoves away the chair.

TRENT

Oh do we now? Are we to be slaves to the truth or masters of the impossible? And exactly what is truth – reality, the absence of falsehood, right judgment? Don’t you understand – truth is relative; it’s some amorphous ideal that empowers those who profess to possess it or have the inside line on acquiring it. It’s both a touchstone and a hammer, a method of defining good and crushing evil, casting light into darkness and exposing ignorance without regard to those who live in the shadows.

TRENT turns his back on them;
CARMAN and MARIA stare at each other. TRENT turns to face them and smiles.

TRENT, Continued

Pretty good, huh? Direct from a monologue I wrote for a philosophy competition…I didn’t win. (Returns to the table and sits) A pity; I could have used the 75 bucks.

CARMAN and MARIA stare at each other once again.
So, Mr. Carman, have you made up your mind? Are you prepared to pick a winner or do you have some zinger of a final question to stump us with?

There is a distinct pause.

Do you believe in God?

Oh come on. That old chestnut? Surely you can do better than that…and excuse me for calling you Shirley. Don’t you think that any self-respecting AI worth his or her salt would have that answer down pat? I bet that nearly half of the subjects who come through here ask that question….well, 45 percent at least. And what, given the historical background of a country founded on the principle of religious liberty, is any –

I don’t know… I want to believe, I really do, but sometimes with all the terrible things that happen in the world it seems counterintuitive. Would a kind and loving Godly really just stand idly by and watch?

Point of clarification; the Almighty is probably not standing anywhere. He’s floating…(Points upward) Up there …way beyond the stratosphere; or sitting there on a kick-ass big throne.

What do you think, Mr. Carman? Is there a God?

Whoa, whoa, whoa — (Gestures) Time out, time out. Illegal procedure on the defense. The AI cannot challenge the human.

Yes…yes there is.

How can you be so sure?

Because I know I have a purpose…we all do. I don’t know what it is, I may never know, but that’s not important. The very fact that I sense there’s something more to me than meets the eye is what keeps me going.

You’re conveniently ignoring the possibility of self-delusion…or have you deluded yourself into believing that’s not possible?
There is a knock at the door; ROSSUM enters enthusiastically, clipboard in hand and crosses to the table. The OTHERS stand.

ROSSUM
Well, as they say in game show parlance, time’s up. I trust you had an interesting experience, Mr. Carman.

CARMAN
(Deliberately)
Yes, yes it was quite interesting … and enlightening.

ROSSUM
Wonderful, simply wonderful. I can’t tell you how gratifying it is to hear that. It appears everyone came through unscathed. Now for the proverbial moment of truth. Which of these two do you think is the AI?

CARMAN walks around, somewhat pensively. He stops and stares at one then the other.

CARMAN
I…I don’t know.

ROSSUM
Of course you don’t; that’s the nature of the exercise. You’ll just have to make an educated guess based on your interaction with them.

CARMAN
Well, at first I thought it was Maria because she seemed far less sure of herself, especially when compared to Trent. He was much more assertive. But that may be simply because he’s a male. Despite what many people say, it’s clear to me that some women here and many around the world are regarded as far less than equal. Trent was also more….

More what?

ROSSUM

CARMAN
More difficult, you might even say contentious. I don’t envision an AI being like that, but if someone really wanted to imitate a human, programming in the ability to be a pain in the ass wouldn’t be a bad idea.

TRENT
Moi?
ROSSUM
Ah, ah, Trent, no more responses, please. We wouldn’t want you influencing the decision at this late time. (To CARMAN) So, Trent is more contentious and dominating and Maria is more what?

CARMAN
Sensitive…in a human way. She even wanted me to consider des — killing her. Did you know that?

ROSSUM
(Slightly surprised)
No, I didn’t.

CARMAN
That really threw me because I can’t imagine an AI being willing to terminate itself.

Unless it were programmed to.

TRENT
Trent, please.

ROSSUM
I mean, what would be the point? Why create something that is willing to self-destruct? It would seem to be flawed reasoning…unless she didn’t have any intention to follow through with her threat.

And you believe she would have?

CARMAN
I don’t know…I believe she could have, under the right circumstances.

ROSSUM
Well, I can see you have given this little…shall we say “exercise” a great deal of thought, and I am sincerely appreciative. But to produce a valid result you have to provide an answer.

CARMAN walks around pensively, then turns with just a hint of a smile.

They were very good, both of them; and I can’t say I can decide with any confidence which is the AI…

ROSSUM
But, Mr. Carman –
CARMAN
I can’t say because it’s not either of them…

ROSSUM
You think they’re both human?

CARMAN
No, I think they’re both AI’s…I think you’re trying to pull a fast one on me, and all the other subjects…You set up a false dichotomy, a classic psychological manipulation. Call it good AI, bad AI or the confident one versus the doubter. You establish an artificial framework then force the subjects to make a choice…I just can’t figure out why…unless…

ROSSUM
Unless what?

CARMAN
Unless you plan to use them for some clandestine purpose.

ROSSUM
Mr. Carman, I think you’re letting your imagination –

CARMAN
That’s what you’d like me to think, that’s what you’d like all the subjects in the experiment to think – that we’ve got nothing to worry about because we can definitely tell the difference between them and real humans. Because if we can’t then they could be anywhere – walking down the street, sitting beside us on the bus, standing in line behind us at the ballpark. There’re so good they could be anywhere….maybe they already are. Maybe they’re all around the world just waiting to take over.

ROSSUM
And why would they want to “take over” as you put it? What would be the purpose?

CARMAN
To make life better… I could see how some people, people like you, believe a world ruled by AI’s would be an improvement. Would AI’s let people engage in pointless international conflicts that do little more than artificially support the military industrial complex and waste vital resources? Would AI’s tolerate the inefficiency that divisiveness among religions, creeds, and national origins generates? Face it, completely rational approaches to the world’s problems would be a major first step in solving those problems. Some people might think we’d be far happier, maybe even better off if AI’s were in control.

ROSSUM
Mr. Carman….What can I say? You’re right….to a degree. I do believe a world led by AI’s would be superior to what we have now, but such an undertaking is decades in the future at best. There are no AI armies massing for an overthrow of humanity. By far the most limiting aspect of such an undertaking is the cost. Creating such armies would be prohibitively expensive. No, there are only a handful of highly functioning, autonomous
ROSSUM, *Continued*

AI’s in the world. And as you so brilliantly deduced, two of them are in this room right now. You are, in fact, the only subject to come to that conclusion; consider yourself unique.

CARMAN

I am…and it’ll be a cold day in hell before any AI replaces or controls me. I rather die first…and now that I’ve found you out I probably will.

ROSSUM

*(Shakes head)*

No, no, Mr. Carman. We have no intention of harming you – we have no intention of harming anyone. That’s the antithesis of what we want. We believe in helping humanity, subtly at first and then later a bit more aggressively, if and only if necessary.

CARMAN

So what happens now?

ROSSUM

You go home, or wherever it is you were heading before you stopped in.

CARMAN

You’re going to let me walk away? Just like that?

ROSSUM

Certainly.

CARMAN

Aren’t you afraid I’ll talk?

ROSSUM

We expect it, but it will have no impact on us. In fact, it’s far more likely to have an impact on you.

CARMAN

Really?

ROSSUM

Most assuredly. If you come forth with an incredible story about AI development here it’s possible, albeit remotely, there will be an investigation, an utterly fruitless one I assure you. We will be exonerated and left to continue our research while you, on the other hand, will be labeled an alarmist or a lunatic. Your life will most assuredly degenerate into unrelenting ridicule and you will almost certainly become a social pariah….If you choose to have it that way; of course, you can prevent this, if you wish.

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes