


# The Leacock Medal for Humour

Canada's Award for Literary Humour

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## **The Elephant In The Room(ba)**

(based on true events)

by

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It's late on a February evening, and it appears that my sister and I have stumbled upon a crime scene at the top of the basement staircase. The victim: one pint-sized, circular household vacuum, affectionately nicknamed "Clark" by the family.

The little robot lies helplessly on the basement floor below us, like a turtle stuck upsidedown on its shell. His wheels spin fervently as if to regain his posture and dignity, but alas: there's nothing to grip onto. It is abundantly clear to all onlookers that Clark has (barely) survived a death-defying fall down 12 stairs. Although a reverberating crash had echoed through the house, alerting all parties to the scene, there is only one true eyewitness to this incident.

Piper, a 4-year-old goldendoodle mix, stares up at the investigators with her wide, innocent eyes.

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At this point, it is anyone's guess what may have transpired during the few minutes dog and robot were left unsupervised. Was it an untimely accident on the part of a not-so-intelligent smart vacuum? Was it a tragic and willful mechanical suicide? Or, perhaps, had a scheming canine tired of the robot's antics offered a light shove in the wrong direction?

As mentioned: there were no human bystanders to this crime. Your guess is as good as mine dear reader. Perhaps you may come to a more plausible conclusion if I present all of the facts in sequential order. Yes, then you will be informed enough to draw your own conclusions about the Elephant in the Room(ba).

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It is December 25, 2021. A strange cylindrical parcel lies beneath the Christmas tree.

"It's a Roomba!" my mom cries, pulling off the frankly excessive bubble wrap. Her grin slips as she reads the fine print of the package.

"It's... an off-brand Roomba," she clarifies. Our newest addition to the broom closet bears the name and mascot 'Shark'. Not quite a patented Roomba, but surely a step up from a traditional vacuum, right?

We free the little guy from his zip-tie shackles, and shove batteries into his chest. His LED eyes light up, and he releases a joyful mechanical squeak. Then, the family watches as our supposedly ‘smart’ robot bumbles around the living room. The little machine beelines for the coffee table, resulting in a sickening smack against the wood. Undeterred, he swivels in a new direction and wobbles on until he hits the next wall.

Again and again, our robot crashes and pivots, underbelly swishing joyfully as he sucks up pet hair and dust. We try to act excited, like overly-supportive parents at their child’s first soccer game, but it’s clear that his method is... unconventional at best.

You see, a Shark-brand vacuum is significantly less smart than its iRobot companions.

Roombas (or Roombae, if you’re a Latin nerd) are intelligent beasts. They are calculating creatures who make mental floor plans of the spaces they clean and use fancy apps to optimize their vacuuming potential. Clark the Shark, as he came to be known, used the time-honoured and far simpler technique of “keep moving until I hit a wall.”

For what it’s worth, Clark really did a formidable job at cleaning the floors by sheer perseverance. Eventually, after a few hours of aimlessly banging into walls, every inch of our laminate had been vacuumed without the humans having to lift a finger. The end justified the means, and Clark was officially a hero.

So, we gave him a name, some pronouns, and (though short-lived) his own set of googly eyes. Clark became a part of the family: shuttled back and forth between our home and cottage, and fed a steady diet of dirt, hair and the occasional toenail. Only one member of our household had any qualms about our new robot, and her name was Piper.

It’s not hard to understand why our dog was frightened by Clark. He smelled new, rattled doors, and hummed a soft whirring noise as he worked. Not to mention, he swiftly devoured Piper’s rightful share of the crumbs on the kitchen floor.

However, despite her clear distrust, Clark couldn’t take a hint. His advances towards her grew more frequent. The robot would approach the poor dog again and again, disturbing her precious naps. Piper would jump onto couches to avoid Clark, and no matter where she was, she watched his every move out of the corner of her eye. Quite literally, he was always on her tail.

Soon, the humans of the house also began to notice Clark’s strange behaviours. He seemed to grow more comfortable and often tested his limits, trying to break through the barriers into rooms he shouldn’t have been in. We positioned chairs to keep him out of bathrooms and bedrooms, but the inquisitive little vacuum wormed through them, rumbling contentedly.

It wasn’t long until Clark mastered the art of opening doors that were left ajar. As the ancient saying goes: “Thou hast not known true fear, until thou hast experienced thine robotic vacuum impeding upon thy bathroom while thou takest a poop.”

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As Clark got bolder, he became more powerful. With this power, there came a great hunger. He began to crave things other than his prescribed diet of dirt, crumbs, and fur. Our supply of hair ties was at an all-time low, as he gobbled up any elastic bands he found. Clark slurped earbud cables like spaghetti, with a side of paperclip breadsticks. Even forgotten homework

disappeared into his gaping jaw, only to be spat out in crumples.

Every day, Clark managed to find trouble. His mantra was the robot equivalent of Murphy's Law (or alternatively, the mentality of a sixth grade boy): anything that he *shouldn't* meddle with, he *would* meddle with.

Tensions were high, as the family battled for control over the artificially intelligent forces of Clark the Shark. We'd return home after a long day, only to find him upside down amid a pile of shoes, or inexplicably wedged under the bed in a room with the door closed. When Piper's tail was nearly clipped by his reckless sprints, it was her final straw.

Someone needed to put an end to the tyrannical reign of Clark the Shark, and it wasn't going to be the humans.

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And suddenly it was February, and my sister and I had returned from our late-night dog walking adventure. As we entered the home, we heard the all-too-familiar buzz of Clark's motor, hard at work. Piper glanced up at us worriedly, and we offered gentle pets and ear scratches.

"Don't worry," my sister said. "He won't hurt you."

"Why don't you go to the basement?" I suggested to Piper. "Clark can't get you down there, don't worry."

It was true, our basement was the one Clark-free safe zone in the house. Heavy carpet and steep stairs rendered it too dangerous for a little vacuum, and therefore the perfect haven for an apprehensive dog.

Piper opted instead to play watchdog, not letting Clark out of her sight as my sister and I made a snack. So absorbed were we in our culinary pursuits, that we didn't notice the stand-off by the basement stairs. It was only when a sickening crash echoed through the house, that our investigation was prompted.

There, sitting at the top of the steps and gazing down at the flailing robot below, sat Piper.

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As I said, there were no true witnesses to the crime. Only a dog and a vacuum, locked in a years-long territorial dispute. Perhaps there is a shred of irony in Clark's hubris, which landed him belly-up in the only part of the house he hadn't yet laid claim. Perhaps the whole thing was an unfortunate accident, and Piper merely had the good fortune to witness Clark's downfall.

However, with neither possessing the power of speech, we will never fully know what caused this mysterious act of true rage against the machine.