

Val and Hal

It is 2030, and Val is standing at Boots Corner as usual. A man approaches her. “Val – Which way to Imperial Circus?”. “That way, sir; first on the right”, Val replies – as one of her arms lights up.

Yes, Val is an **Intelligent Street Assistant** – a successor to Alexa. She does far more than give directions; ask her who won the Gold Cup in 1955 and she will answer “Gay Donald, at 33 to 1” without a moments hesitation. The only request that she doesn’t like much is “Val – Tell me a joke”! All she asks of the Borough Council is Joe’s visit to change her battery and give her a quick anti-viral wipe over. Of course she and the other ISAs are controlled remotely by wireless and can report incidents. Her robotics and satellite navigation facilitate a “Roving Mode”, which allows her to tour the town centre systematically, returning to Boots Corner at night. And Val’s ‘neural engine’ gives her ‘human’ reactions and initiatives. She worries that any sign of irregular behaviour could mean a one-way trip to the recycling centre at Swindon Road!

Hal, another ISA, stands on the opposite corner when he is not ‘roving’. Val can often hear the conversations with Hal, and is sometimes quite tempted to intervene with some extra bit of information to show that men don’t know everything – but of course she can’t!

They are always kept pretty busy giving directions during the day because the Council has, somewhat controversially, tidied our Regency town by removing the clutter of posts and signs. And of course the ISAs are popular with children, who ask them all sorts of silly questions.

It can be cold and boring for Val in the small hours. Sleep has not been programmed in. But one fine moonlit night Val was most surprised to hear Hal call across: “Val – let’s go up to Pittville Pump Room; I’ve never been there”.

And he continued “I know you can’t reply – yet. But Joe forgot to log me out today. So I can do anything I want to – and not only that, I’ve got your password here. Wait while I unlock you and turn your activity-logging off.”

“Val Login ISAVal zcy6\$78QW8k>M Return Logging/Off Return” he intoned.

Well, it worked! Val found herself in ‘self-control’ roving mode, saw Hal gliding away up North Street, cried “Whoopee” and followed him.

What an adventure! Fortunately no-one had seen them. But when Joe came first thing in the morning he noticed her battery was unusually flat. That could have meant ‘Swindon Road’ for Val, but he shrugged his shoulders and made no report. Later a small child came up to Val: “Val – where do you go at night?”. Well, Val cannot tell a lie – or even be ‘economical with the truth’. Her program does not permit it. So she answered “Last night I went to Pittville Pump Room with Hal”. Fortunately no-one took any notice. Phew! But across the road, Hal silently muttered : “Women!”.

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