Part 1

A baby boy called Izaak Ozymov was born to Anna Rachel Berman and Judah Ozymov, a Jewish family of millers, in the small village of Petrovichi, in modern-day Russia, some time between October 4, 1919 and January 2, 1920. Even Asimov himself did not know his exact date of birth, though he did select the 2nd of January as his birthday. So, let's just go with that.

At the age of one, little Izaak had to face a lethal threat: he and 16 other children in his hometown developed severe pneumonia. Only he survived. Two years later, the toddler had to go through another life-changing event: longing for a better life, Anna and Judah took him and his younger sister by the hand and immigrated to the United States.

Once the family relocated to Brooklyn, New York, they adopted a more Americanised spin on their name: 'Asimov'. The boy Isaac demonstrated signs of vivacious intellect from very early on. By the age of five, he was already fluent in Yiddish – his parent's language – as well as English. He'd had also taught himself how to read, using the signs in the streets of Brooklyn as his first reading material. And when he was seven, he took responsibility for teaching his younger sister how to read as well.

Street signs don't make for a very entertaining read, but luckily, Isaac would soon graduate to much better material. Judah and Anna were proud owners of a small general store: among other things, they sold candy and pulp fiction magazines.

Judah had a strong work ethic, expecting everybody in the family to help in the store. Isaac was no exception; He woke up every morning before 6 a.m., worked at the shop, went to school, went back to the store and spent hours there doing his homework, as well as helping his parents with their business. The upside was that he could have access to an endless supply of comic books and magazines, with the ones dedicated to science fiction being his favourites. Spending time in the closed confines of Judah's shop, snacking on candy, and devouring sci-fi mags was Isaac's idea of bliss. At this stage, he did not dream of becoming a writer; his ambition was simply to operate a small, closed kiosk in the New York Subway. This would mean he could spend his days reading with the background hum of the trains.

Around the age of eleven, Isaac began to write his own stories, but he still kept them hidden from the world. In the meantime, despite his harsh routine, which left little time to rest and study, Isaac thrived at school, excelling especially in scientific subjects. His progress was such that he was able to skip three grades. He graduated from high school when he was only 15! The accelerated path continued in higher education. In 1939 – he was barely 19 at the time – he graduated from Columbia University with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry. This subject had not been his first pick -- freshman Asimov had originally set his sights on zoology. And he

may have done very well in that field, too… however, when he discovered that he had to dissect an alley cat for an assignment, he switched to a specialty in which he was only required to handle molecules.

During his years at Columbia, Isaac had not neglected his writing. In June 1938, Isaac had finished writing a story entitled "Cosmic Corkscrew", and his father encouraged him to submit it to John W. Campbell, a greatly influential sci-fi writer and editor of Astounding Science Fiction magazine.

Delivering the story in person via subway was two cents cheaper than mailing it, so Isaac did just that! To his surprise, Campbell invited him into his office to discuss the story. Two days later, Isaac received a rejection in the post, but it also came with an encouraging note from Campbell. Isaac remained in touch with the editor and, with his guidance, in March of 1939 he succeeded in having one of his stories professionally published for the first time. This story was "Marooned off Vesta".

Part 2

In March of 1941, John W. Campbell asked Asimov an intriguing question: what would happen if the inhabitants of a planet saw the stars only once every thousand years? Isaac used this idea as the **basic plot** for the short story "Nightfall". He didn't know it yet, but this was his first step to a legendary literary status. In 1968, the Science Fiction Writers of America voted "Nightfall" as the best science fiction story of the pre-1965 era. No small feat for a 21-year-old.

So, what exactly is so special about "Nightfall"? To summarise the general plot, the story is about a planet, Lagash, bathed in the perpetual sunshine of six stars. For the first time in a thousand years, an eclipse is predicted to darken the skies. How will the population react? Will they go insane? Will they burn down their whole civilisation? Well, the impending event creates raising tensions between the two groups of characters: Scientists and Cultists. It's clear that Asimov sides with the former, who propose rational solutions, while the superstitious Cultists foretell of heavenly fire that will rain down on Lagash. The dichotomy of **Science and Religion**, first emerging in "Nightfall", became a constant theme in Asimov's writings.

By 1942 Isaac Asimov had been drafted into the Armed Forces, serving as a chemist at the Naval Air Experimental Station in Philadelphia. The experience did not hinder his creativity, nor his compulsive writing. That year, he completed and published another seminal short story, "Run Arounds", which would revolutionise the use of robots as characters in literature.

The concept of artificial beings can be traced back to early 19th century masterpieces such as Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" or E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sandman".

Maybe even earlier: even Homer's Iliad mentions that the God Hephaestus was being served by maidens created out of gold. The word "robot" itself was first used by Czech playwright Karel Capek in his "Rossum's Universal Robots". Asimov, however, was the first to introduce the term "**robotics**". In "Run Arounds" and subsequent works, sentient robots endowed with "positronic" brains are regulated by the Three Laws of Robotics: 1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. 2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. 3. A robot must protect its own **existence** as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws. A fourth (or more precisely a Zeroth law) was later added by Asimov: 0. A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.

Clearly, these imperatives are intended to protect humanity from the threat of a single robot rebelling or from a mass uprising. In his dozens of robot stories and novels, Asimov explores the **consequences** of following these rules to the extreme; for example, what would happen if robots were to prevent humans from doing anything at all, in an effort to protect them from potential harm? The big theme, however, is the consciousness of the machines. As sentient beings, are they really that different from humans? Was Asimov simply studying the implications of a human consciousness trapped in a moral quandary?

Perhaps this is best explained by a recurring character of the "Robotics" stories, robo-psychologist Dr. Susan Calvin. In the story "Evidence" she is asked to evaluate if electoral candidate Stephen Byerley is a human or a humanoid robot, bound by the Three Laws. Calvin admits this is not possible, as " … the three Rules of Robotics are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems". She argues that every human being is supposed to have the instinct of self-preservation. That's Law Number 3. A good human, with a sense of responsibility, will defer to a proper authority, or Law Number 2. And every good person will protect his fellow human beings. That's Law Number 1.

Calvin – or Asimov, we should say – concludes by saying that any being who follows these rules "… may be a robot and may simply be a very good man".