

Robots in the Workplace

by Con Chapman

A Boston company has created a two-armed humanoid robot named "Baxter" that performs mundane manufacturing tasks and gets a confused look on its face when it needs something.

The Boston Herald



I don't know why the guys are so mean to me just because I'm new here. I'm not taking anybody's job away, I'm freeing them up for the *fun* things, like tying back the trigger on pneumatic drills and dropping them into buckets of water. The first day Lowell over on sub-assembly line #2 sent me to the tool shop to get a sky-hook. Ha ha so funny I forgot to laugh.

Then "Mad Dog" asked me to go get him a left-handed monkey wrench. I should have known better, but he got me. I rolled slowly back to my workstation and this time "Junior" could only shake his head. "You're the rookie, they're going to play their stupid tricks on you," he said. "Ignore 'em." I'd like to, but I can't—I'm sensitive that way.

"I put chewing gum in his distributor cap—this should be fun."

Maybe if I got together with people after work they'd accept me as part of the Klassic Recreational Vehicle team. Chuck was passing

by so I yelled out to him “Hey man, it's Friday—are guys getting together later for you know, like a TGIF?”

“Naw, we're all just gonna go home and play with our kids or spend quality time with our spouses. That's what makes a relationship stronger,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

I gave him my best confused look. Not that I didn't trust him, but he had that spring in his step that you don't normally associate with domestic routine.

“Oh, well, I guess I'll see you Monday,” I said, fighting back a flood of 10W40 tears from around my visual perception apparatus.



“Guys—wait for me!”

“Sure, there'll be other times,” Chuck said as he punched his time card. I didn't have to punch out since I'm not getting paid. I stopped at the candy machine for some Chuckles; I know they're bad for my masticating plates, but a working robot's gotta get a *little* pleasure out of life.



I rolled past Bill the manager's office and rotated my head to say good night.

"You knockin' off?" he asked. I don't think he had *my* interests at heart. My guess is, he knows I haven't found that certain special something in my life and figures he can grind me for all I'm worth, which is \$3,995, secured or lease financing available.

"Yeah, I'm beat," I said. Thankfully while I'm capable of a few simple expressions, my metal and plastic face is a mask that conceals disappointment.

"Oh, okay. Well thanks for all you're doing out there, great job!"

"Thanks, nice of you to say that." It'd be nicer if you showed even a shred—and try saying *that* five times fast—of empathy for me.

"I'm heading out myself," Bill said as he got up and turned off his desk lamp. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"No, thanks, really. It'd be more trouble than it's worth to get me into the back of your pick-up. I just roll home on local roads."

"Okay, see ya Monday."

"What's a nice cyborg like you doing in a place like this?"

I waved goodbye and as I turned around saw Lowell and Mad Dog and Chuck peeling out of the parking lot heading down towards 16th Street. I knew where they were going; The Den of Iniquity, the watering-hole favored by real and fake single men in our little burg.

When your wife or girlfriend kicks you out of the house and you have nowhere to go, Dan the owner will let you tell the Post Office to forward your mail to his bar.

I was fuming, but I decided to take the high road; I'd go to the same bar, but act like I didn't care that the other guys hadn't invited me.

It took me a while but when I got to The Den the guys weren't so totally snookered that they didn't notice me. I blew in all breezy-like, as if I hadn't a care in the world.

"Hey Dan!" I squealed in my best I-couldn't-give-two-squirts-of-lubricant-that-you-guys-didn't-ask-me-to-join-you voice.

"Hey Baxter, how they hanging?"

"I don't have any, remember?"

"Oh, right. What'll ya have?"

"The usual."

"STP 'n tonic?"

"You got that right!"

I put some quarters in the jukebox and played "Disco Robot" to let everybody know Baxter was here. Dan served my drink and I was doing my best imitation of an air conditioning cooling unit when I saw—her; the sweetest piece of metal I'd ever laid eyes on.

She had that distant look that drives me wild in a woman; the air that says she's above it all, the Alpha Female, and is only condescending to spend time with humans because she has to. The universal body language for "Let's blow this pop stand and head back to my clean room for some serious lug nut nuzzling."



I nodded at Dan. He approached her and said that the cyborg at the end of the bar wanted to buy her a drink. She gave me a sidelong glance, then looked back at Dan and said “Dry vermouth with a twist of aluminum”—a woman after my own cold little electronic pump!

I scooted down a few seats and introduced myself. I don't come on strong like a lot of robots—I know love between artificial intelligences can take time to grow. And I also wasn't going to feed her one of those lame pick-up lines that some humanoid males store in their memories; “There must be a magnet in my pants because I'm attracted to your steel buns,” etc. Not my style.

“This place isn't much, but it's just about the only game in town,” I said with a wistful little smile that said I wished I'd met her in

Silicon Valley or Route 128 around Boston, "America's Technology Highway." Someplace where we'd . . . fit in.

"It'll do," she purred. "So—what do you do?"

I gulped, wondering whether she'd be a snob about my blue-collar job. "I . . . work out at Klassic Recreational Vehicles."

"Oh," she said evenly, so I couldn't tell if she was disappointed. She didn't *sound* excited, though.



"How about you?" I asked. Best to change the subject, there's nowhere to go but up.

"I'm . . . a stock picker at the internet bookstore warehouse out on West 50," she said. If she were the luxury model and had eyelashes, they would have been batting right now she was so coquettish.

"Oh. That must be more interesting than slapping together RVs for retired Midwesterners."

"My parents are retired Midwesterners." Oops.

"What a coincidence," I said with chagrin, trying to recover. "From around here?"

"My mom was an iron lung in the hospital. My dad was a vacuum tube computer."



"That's nice," I said, staring into my drink. My foot's in my mouth so much I chewed away my rubber wheels.

"Do you like to bowl?" she asked. Wasn't expecting that one.

"Sure. It's a fun way to get to know each other while enjoying healthful exercise in a booze-infused social atmosphere!"

"Why don't we roll over to Hillcrest Lanes . . ."

I tried to speak, but I was choked up.

"Not interested?" she said, sounding a little hurt.

"No, it's just that . . . my dad was Robot Bowler of the Week there once."

"Really?"

"Yes. It was the scene of his greatest kegling triumphs."

"You must have been awfully proud of him."

Here's where the pain comes in. "I was, but it made it hard for me."

"Why?"

"Everyone expected me to live up to his reputation."

"Like Frank Sinatra, Jr.?"



" . . . *it's so sad—I don't sing as good as my dad!*"

"Right, or John Quincy Adams."

It was her turn to avoid my gaze. "So . . . I gather it didn't go so well?"

"They called me the Porno Kid."

She seemed a little . . . mystified. "Why?"

"I couldn't keep my balls out of the gutter."

