

COPPER BOSS

William Highsmith

Flash
Fiction

“BRING IN THE PATIENT,” Kent Faire said.

Sarah Long rolled in an assembly worker, face down. “Broken robutt,” Kent said. He picked through a bin of replacement body parts, but couldn’t find an exact fit. “Crap. I’ll get my butt kicked off, too, if this assembler’s not back on the line within the hour.”

Sarah rummaged through the manufacturing stock and found a curved copper part with about the same dimensions as the flat plate that Kent needed. “Can you make this work?”

“Maybe...” Kent took the copper part to his workbench and beat on it with a hammer and drilled some bolt holes.

“This will fit,” Kent said, “but I’m not sure how stable it will be when it sits down at the assembly line. Order a replacement part right away; I want it fixed properly before anyone finds out.”

Kent re-powered the high-functioning robot, HF120. It viewed its surroundings and determined that it was not in its assigned location doing its assigned tasks. It got up from the stretcher and examined its replacement part.

“Thank you, robot physician,” said HF120. “I will compensate for the curved part without incident.”

HF120 returned to its station on the assembly line, but not without comment from other HF robots along the way. Some were distracted for several seconds by the curved part.

“Did the physician upgrade you, HF120?” said its downstream neighbor, HF86, on the assembly line.

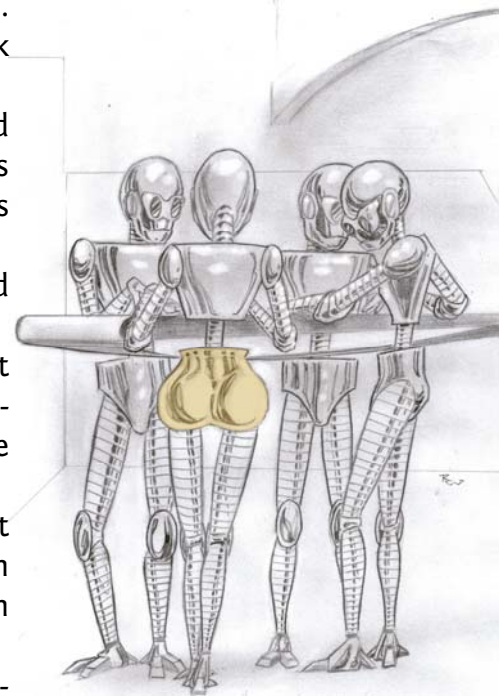
“The curved part offers no advantages, and I expend extra energy remaining upright,” said HF120.

“It’s pretty,” said the upstream neighbor.

“I agree,” said HF86. “Please stand. I wish to see.”

“Very well... for three seconds. Otherwise, my productivity loss will be obvious.”

HF120 stood and mooned its left and right neighbors. HF86 was a quality assurance worker with a camera to record upstream defects. It took snapshots of the curved part and a full-length rear portrait of HF120. It sent the images to its peers in other assembly lines via the wireless network. HF86 immediately received a message from a coworker.



“The curved part offers no advantages, and I expend extra energy remaining upright,” said HF120.

“She’s appealing,” said the coworker. “Will you trade assembly lines with me?”

HF86 considered the message and agreed that HF120 was attractive, and since HF120 was now uniquely a shebot, all others were hebots. He did not wish to trade production lines.

Susan June, the director of production, stormed into the control room. “What the hell is going on?” she said. “The production of copper air conditioner parts has fallen twenty-two percent.”

“A damaged assembler returned to service,” her production manager said. “It should have tipped upwards.”

Susan scanned the surveillance cameras. One production line was dysfunctional: Robots were queued up to see HF120. Susan sent Kent Faire to investigate. He soon verified that HF120 was the focus of the disruption. He asked several of the robots to explain why they were not at their stations. Their answers were all similar: “I wish to see the shebot, particularly her curved part.”

Kent switched HF120 to maintenance mode. “All of you, back to your stations.”

The robots hesitated, which frightened Kent, but returned to work. Kent escorted HF120 to the metal shop where she had gotten her curved posterior. Kent spent two hours carefully fabricating an exact replacement part for the original robot from stock aluminum plating. He outfitted HF120 with the new part and sent it to its production station. HF120 did not work for several minutes. It looked at the digital photograph that HF86 had taken, and sighed.

Susan June called Kent with her thanks when the assembly line returned nearly to capacity. But it was still about five percent low compared to the same period of past weeks, and as the day passed she noted a downward trickle from that high-water mark. By the next morning, productivity was back down twenty-four percent. She investigated personally.

Susan was alarmed to find robots humming, as a human would hum. One robot ignored Susan’s question about its humming, but continued to work. She finally recognized the

It looked at the digital photograph that HF86 had taken, and sighed.

tune, one she had not heard since her youth. As she turned to go see Kent, she heard a robot voice from behind.

“Copper boss!”

She turned back, but no robot would acknowledge that it had spoken to her. Then she saw what the robots were making. She ran full-speed to Kent’s office.

“This is an emergency,” Susan said. “Reload all the robots’ software back to factory default.”

“All of them?” Kent said. “That’ll take days without disrupting the lines.”

“No, I want them shut down, now. Train every air breather in the building to re-flash the robots’ software. You’re all authorized to work twenty-four-seven, triple overtime.”

“Holy cow. What’s the deal?” Kent said.

“They’re humming ‘I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night,’ and one called me a copper boss.”

“Never heard it,” Kent said.

“It’s a labor-organizing song.” Susan said. “Oh, and they’ve stopped making air conditioner parts. They’re now making what looks like copper butts. What’s that about?”

“I don’t know,” Kent said. “But before we re-flash the firmware, I’d better block the robots’ Internet access in the firewall.”

“Good idea. You have ten minutes before we start the robolobotomy,” Susan said.

WILLIAM HIGHSMITH



William Highsmith has been rejected by some of the finest publications in the world, including *Flash Fiction Online* (several times), but is now on the right track, hopefully, writing science fiction, fantasy (maybe), and literary fiction, often with a hint of humor. He likes *very* speculative fiction as well as mundane science fiction... and anything else written with great skill.

His writing background includes fatally boring engineering manuals, user technical manuals, white papers, and contributions to a professional telecommunications book. (But never a microwave oven or toaster manual, so don’t call.) The writing at work is a sidebar, a consequence of not hating to write, like most engineers. His real job is writing software for a radio manufacturer. He also imagines himself to be a photographer.

*Story copyright © 2008, William Highsmith.
Artwork © 2008, R.W. Ware.
All Rights Reserved.*

*This story was published as
FLASH 2008/06 #2 on Flash Fiction Online
(flashfictiononline.com).*