

David Barsham

A short story by Jonathan Baumgart

The incessant beeping of David Barsham's alarm quickly tore him from his peaceful dreaming and like a cold splash of water on his face, he once again returned to the depressing world that was his reality. To David, they weren't really dreams anyway, rather a precious escape that was his reward for surviving another day. Dreams, he thought, as he began to shake himself out of his weariness, had been something he'd given up on a long time ago. David had grown so accustomed to the various noises in his household that he nearly forgot to turn off the alarm, which had now disturbed his sleeping wife. He quietly urged her to go back to sleep, threw off his covers and officially began another day. His joints cracked a bit as he stepped out of his bed causing him to shake his head out of despair. Although David had recently turned 31, he felt like he was nearing 40, especially during mornings such as these. Among many other things, David could have used more sleep but that, of course, was not reality.

His groggy mind attempted to figure out the day but he quickly gave up since it really didn't matter. In no time he had gotten dressed and double checked that he was carrying his badge. Glancing at his watch, he hurried off to catch the 5:15 super shuttle to the IFO plant. There was no time for breakfast but that served him just fine. Money was tight since his second child had arrived and David figured that he could stand to lose a few pounds anyway.

David Barsham of California was employed by IFO Corporation, a household name both in America and throughout the world. IFO produced and supplied the planet with hundreds of thousands of androids every year and as of this writing faced little if any competition. The company was able to maintain its domination of the industry through shrewd business practices, back door dealings and a heavily influential lobbying group. One of the many small cogs that made up the IFO machine was David. As a basic laborer at one of the hundreds of IFO plants scattered throughout the United States, his job description was quite simple: Produce more robots. The majority of David's day consisted of moving large pieces of sheet metal and piping that had arrived from overseas to various parts of the plant. These materials would then be molded, shaped, bent and welded into the final product. A completed android could then be shipped locally as well as anywhere in the world. By operating exclusively in the United States, IFO had created thousands of jobs for desperate Americans and as a result gained enormous political power. After the Great Crash of 2065, it was a breath of relief for the country to see even a few new jobs created. As much as David disliked going to work, his employment put him in a position of privilege although he was still trying to figure out why he never really felt that lucky.

David stepped outside of his high rise apartment complex and gazed for a moment at the surroundings.

"So this is progress," he muttered to himself as he looked at the drab conditions that made up his neighborhood.

It wasn't waking up to his family that made life such a challenge. To the contrary, David loved his home; it was his life. He needed food to nourish his body but only the constant thoughts of his wife and children gave him the fuel that he needed to *live*. What disturbed David so much in the morning was the world that greeted him. Stagnant puddles of water mixed with chemicals and other by products seemed to be ever-present. As to the source, something, somewhere was leaking. There was no money to fix such a problem; a building superintendent was a luxury these days and it would

most likely never get fixed. If it were just a few puddles to dodge, David could have lived with it, but as numerous as the puddles, were the homeless, who David often thought of as his "neighbors on the first floor". The majority of them lay asleep, huddled in their jackets. One offspring of the Great Crash was a highly addictive hallucinogenic substance known as "Twitch." The name was derived from the body's initial reaction to the chemical which caused violent convulsions at the onset of initial dosage. Nobody is certain how the drug was developed or who exactly started the craze. Some attribute it to a foreign drug cartel, which knew the exact product for a desperate nation while the more cynical felt it was the government's homegrown solution to its employment problem. The origins of "Twitch", however, were inconsequential as its spell had already been cast upon the United States. According to the latest research, nine out of ten users would die within three months of their first hit. There were a variety of reasons for David to believe the statistic. Many local dealers would try to undercut the cartel by producing a watered down version of the drug, replacing the missing contents with harmful chemicals. Also, the drug itself was incredibly addicting and its side effects could have only been concocted by a truly warped mind. The best evidence to suggest this was the rapid transformation of the user after the first trip had ended. Scientists were not certain but the drug appeared to program commands of further use directly into the user's brain. Afterwards the victim would continue on an unending mission to seek out the drug and could not be swayed otherwise. Twitch was one step up from heroin, a physically addicting drug from a century or so ago. David was convinced it was the Devil at play. He had watched his own cousin succumb to its fate and it saddened him when he heard it talked about it on the streets, where the lingo went something like this: "Life's a bitch, that's why I twitch." Most of David's "neighbors" were now in the depressive phase of the experience, which put them into a coma-like sleep for several hours. When they awoke they would find themselves in a painful horror. The sight of the homeless always recalled memories of David's late cousin. Although several years had gone by, the image was permanently etched in his mind. All he needed to do was think back for a moment and he could see those bloodshot eyes, burning with torture. Among the hundreds of curses that bellowed from this dying man, it was only a few words that David never forgot. He could see his face now, contorted in pain, as he screamed: "The fires of hell are burning me up from the inside, I can...I can feel the grip of the devil...in my soul!" And he lay on the floor like that for hours screaming such dreadful things and twisting his body until he finally fainted, exhausted. This was why David ran to work in the morning; it was an escape from those who already had.

As David reached the shuttle stop he came across one of his fellow coworkers, Mitch Bowsmith, a scruffy man with a full beard and deep voice. While his uniform was of the same make as David's, its original color had faded. A humble fellow, it simply took the uniform and some small talk for the rest of the crew to both respect and look up to him. Mitch also had a knack for finding information related to IFO's corporate strategy long before it was made known to the public. While he never revealed his source, there was no need to. He had earned the trust of his fellow coworkers and what he said was always accepted as truth. Mitch greeted David with a stoic face.

"Heard we got ourselves a big shipment coming this way from Indiana. They might be opening another plant is what they are saying now. Word is that they need more of them critters than they thought they did. Another plant might mean possible shot at

foreman.”

Mitch had his eye on the foreman role for a long time. The position could only be filled by an experienced worker and in most cases it meant at least five years of grunt work before it was even a consideration. If anybody in the crew were to get the job it would be Mitch, who had been mentioning it for the past year or so. David was happy for him. As difficult as his life could get, Mitch was an inspiration. He had managed to hold onto his job for years while the average employee would last six months. Many could not take the physical demands of the job as well as shifting schedule. It was not uncommon to work the night shift and be forced to come in a couple of hours later to help out with the day time work. Sometimes several weeks would pass where all the workers would be turned away at the gate, having to pay their train pass for nothing. The brains behind the corporation were shrewd enough to actively seek out the David Barshman's of the world. With unemployment levels as high as they were, it was rather easy to selectively hire men who had families and were willing to sacrifice for them. Like one who is skilled in the arts of torture, they knew the fine line that was a person's breaking point and were quite adept at bringing their workers a hair away from it, but never any closer. Working in the IFO plant was also dangerous for a variety of reasons and compensation for injury involved so many legal loop holes that most simply gave up. Sadly, others turned to Twitch than face the realities of the modern world. The biggest factor, however, was the androids themselves. As the pace of technology increased, so went many possible work opportunities; the only way to survive at IFO was to possess a skill that no robot at the time possessed. It was a constant chess game of sorts although deep down everybody knew who the eventual winner would be. David tried not to dwell on it but the thought was always gnawing at the back of his mind.

“Sure would be nice to be back on two feet again,” David commented as the shuttle drew near.

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Mitch as the two boarded the train.

Ten minutes later David found himself at the entrance of the plant. A sense of dread began to penetrate his stomach as he walked towards the massive doorway. He resolved not to let it consume him and made several attempts to mentally prepare for the day ahead. As David entered the plant and walked towards his designated work zone, he was greeted by his coworker, an android. The robot wore a similar uniform but it was rather easy to determine that it was not human. True, the androids could react to various situations and provide the appropriate response but even a child would be able to pick out the machine from a crowd of humans. It always seemed to be the small things that the development arm of IFO could never get right. At current levels of technology, androids still could not replicate the way David sighed when he stepped outside of his apartment or the confidence in tone that often came from Mitch when he spoke. Furthermore, it seemed improbable that an android would ever be able to make its eyes brighten like a strung out Twitch addict who had recently made a score.

“It is a wonderful morning David Barsham,” the android declared.

“It’s Bar-shem not Bars-ham!” he yelled back, shaking his head in anger at the mispronunciation. “How many times do I have to correct you before you’ll get it?”

David took a lot of his anger out on his fellow coworker. It didn't really matter what he said to it anyway. The android had no feelings; it was simply a machine. Also, it was only able to respond to the most basic of commands, which further added to

David's frustration. The response to his prior comment was a great example:

“I'm quite pleased to bring to your attention that there are new instameals in the break room today. For a limited time you can get a Berkshire Farms beef pot roast or lemon chicken entree for only \$50.00. Berkshire Farms, good food, good people.”

David responded to the offer with his middle finger and proceeded to start his work. While the android was unique in the sense that it had its own name and model number, David, as well as his coworkers, refused to recognize “it” as his equal. He dreaded the times he was forced to actually converse with the machine and to compensate for this miserable task, often chose a derogatory name for android. "Shithead" or "Boner" were among his personal favorites although he would save more offensive monikers for stressful situations. Had the robot possessed true feelings it most likely would have suffered from acute depression by now but since it was simply a machine, the response was always the same: “Correction David. I am model A56, a product of IFO corporation. You can call me Art.”

According to Mitch the next system upgrade would give robots the ability to recognize slanderous terms, which could result in time off for those caught harassing them. It was a subtle yet very significant point. Throughout the United States the workers were growing restless and the tension was nearly palatable when groups gathered outside of the job. With unemployment levels so high, animosity towards the robots was on the rise. It was a vicious cycle in the sense that humans needed to continue to produce robots to survive but were putting themselves out of work as the androids became more numerous and efficient. An astute historian would note that these were the seeds that often led to revolution. If the tension this time around would in fact blossom into something significant was yet to be seen. The facts, however, spoke for themselves.

The morning went by slowly. Take the metal sheets off the pallets; load them on to the new pallets so they could be transported to the other side of the plant; remove the packing material from the metal pipes; inspect them for quality; forward the lower quality pipes to zone five and the unblemished ones to zone eight. Once the cycle had been completed you would start again...and again...and again. David often wondered at times who the true robot was.

Quickly glancing at his watch David knew the half hour until his lunch break would be quite a long one. He was beginning to feel a bit weak as his body reminded him that he had skipped breakfast. In an attempt to take the monotony out of his day, David would hold a contest to see how long he could avoid looking at his watch before his break. He would then mentally prepare himself for a much worse figure so when he finally gave in, he would be surprised. So far the morning had gone by relatively fast but he knew he'd probably glance at his watch a few more times before lunch. Another shipment of metal sheets came and went. Art went about "its" work quietly, the only noise to be heard was the combination of the various machines that collectively made up a bustling plant. The day went on as the two worked in silence.

After what had seemed like hours David finally gave up and shot a quick glance at his watch. It was 12:57 and he was only three minutes away from eating. He had survived half of his day and now all he needed was a strong finish. While he would never admit this to his coworkers, there was one thing that he actually did like about Art, when "it" reminded him of his breaks. The metallic voice was never a second off and today was no exception.

“David Barsham it is time for your break.”

“About time” David said as he made his way towards the breakroom. By now he was so hungry that the lemon chicken instameal sounded delicious to him. He quietly cursed to himself for giving in to the effectiveness of the advertisement but was too overwhelmed with the bliss of taking a break to care about principles. The sweet taste of freedom clouded his judgment and like a man who had fallen madly in love he had no other care in the world than to temporarily relieve himself of his miserable work.

As David attempted to leave the work zone, however, something strange occurred. Art, who was now carrying around 700 pounds of sheetmetal, mimicked David's step, blocking his only way of exiting, for David had his back to the receiving door, which was now closed and due to corporate protocol could only be opened by an authorized shipping manager. Also, the corridor that David stood in was quite narrow and could probably fit two bodies standing lengthwise at most. Now that Art was obstructing David's way, his only option was to move to the left of the robot and then past it. He thought nothing of it and attempted to go around the android but was once again matched. Checkmate.

“David Barsham it is time for your break.”

“Now that’s the second damn time you’ve reminded me you piece of junk.” David said angrily.

He made a third attempt but once again was not successful. David was surprised by the robot's agility, especially when it was carrying such a large load. Surprise, however, quickly gave way to anger and frustration. He knew he was going to have to work through the missing time and all because his company was trying to save a few dollars by producing low quality robots.

“David Barsham, it is time for your break.”

“You cheap hunk of metal, I’m damn hungry! Now let me by!” David tried once more but the outcome was the same.

“David Barsham, it is time for your break,” responded the robot.

“I’ll fix you,” David said and pressed a tiny knob on his shirt. He was wearing a very small earpiece that allowed him to converse with the floor manager throughout the day.

“This is Stephen.” said a faceless voice in David's ear.

“Stephen one of these pieces of junk is flipping out down here in zone A 12. Keeps repeating the same damn phrase and ain't even doing any work. I’m trying to head to lunch and it won’t let me by.”

“Alright Barsham. Gimme a second here, I'm over in G 3 right now, we had a nasty spill this morning. I'll be there in about ten minutes.”

“Hey Stephen, wait. Can you open the delivery door for me, I’m starting to get nervous here. The thing is carrying a big load.”

“That’s a negative Barsham. You know protocol. Only authorized shipping managers have authority to open access gates. I’ll be there in no time.”

The transmission ended and David found himself staring once again at the android.

“They even go to the trouble of making you guys good looking. Well there’s nothing but shit inside, and ain’t that the truth.”

“David Barsham, it is time for your break.”

It was the first time it had ever failed to respond to a direct verbal assault. Now David was growing nervous. He was cornered and there was only one way out from where he was standing. Stephen had told him ten minutes but with a huge spill on his hands that could easily turn into an hour. David began to think of a way out of this mess but his thoughts were interrupted by Art.

“David Barsham, it is time for your break.”

Before David could curse at the machine, it beat him to the punch and repeated the phrase again. It then repeated the phrase again and continued to repeat the phrase. For a brief period of time David simply stared at the robot, mesmerized by the repetitious reminder of his break that he could not go on. He shook his head and tried to drown out the noise. Pangs of fear began to swirl around in his stomach. David tried Stephen again but Art's voice had also grown louder and Stephen was not able to hear make out anything. David was becoming desperate.

“To hell with you, you piece of metal shit! Now let me by!” he screamed but his movement was once again matched by the robot.

David thought about climbing on top of the sheetmetal that the android was carrying. If he could get on top of it, he would be able to use it as a spring board and jump past the robot. The only problem was that the metal was razor sharp and David had already thrown his gloves several meters past the android. He looked over at them now and despite the situation that age old cliché' popped into his head: "So close yet so far away." David decided to give it a go anyway and covered his hands with his shirt sleeves for some sort of protection. He felt his way to the top of the pile, gripped, and attempted to hoist himself above the load. It was a mistake. David screamed in agony as the metal sliced into both of his hands. He fell to the ground in front of Art who not only had begun to repeat the phrase faster but was now slowly walking towards him. David backed up, leaving red handprints on the floor that eerily looked like one of the pre school projects his young son had brought home to him. He screamed in pain as he forgot how badly cut his hands were. The loss of blood and lack of nourishment had caused him to grow faint. On top of that, Art's voice was at full capacity, which was loud enough to hurt David's ears. David had gone as far as he could and his back was now pressed up against the receiving door. He tried to stand up but found that he was too weak and fell to the ground. Tears began to well in his eyes, not out of pain but of love for his family. Art, the now malfunctioning robot, grew closer.

Stephen had managed to make his way over to David's zone. He was on a metal platform that stood about fifty feet above the work floor. It ran throughout the plant and allowed supervisors to observe the workers. As he arrived on the scene he was able to make out both David as well as the machine. He could still see David moving and simply had to shut down the robot. Stephen held a small device in his hand that allowed him to communicate with the various workers in the plant. "This is Stephen, authorization code two double eight Victor Tango Niner. I order you to shut down the android in A12. I repeat full shutdown of the android in zone A12."

"Roger that." was the immediate response. Stephen heard a loud thud and started to feel nauseous.

The corporate report of David Barsham's death confirmed what Stephen only realized when he made his way on to the actual work floor of zone A 12. When the A56 models were designed it was the intent of the corporation that they receive a "makeover"

of sorts. The predecessors, A34, A25, and A27B, all were manufactured to appear with their arms held out and looked as if they were a grandparent asking a reluctant grandchild for a hug. Since their purpose was to carry and transport large loads, it only made sense that they appear in this fashion on floor displays. It was, however, determined by the IFO design team that model A56 should appear more human and less creepy. Corporate strategy felt this would increase camaraderie among fellow coworkers and in the words of Max Blakeman, the designer of the A56 model, "Look damn sexy in the process." Aside from many aesthetic changes there was a slight difference between A56 models and the aforementioned predecessors. A56 models, for the reasons mentioned earlier, would always stand, when idle, like a normal human being; no longer would its arms be held in a servitude fashion. Stephen, whose family connections had gotten him the much coveted supervisor role, had failed to read the manual for the A56 model, which even grunts like David Barshman were rigorously tested on. By shutting down Art, it resumed its floor model position, thereby dropping the sheetmetal directly on top of David.

Fortunately for Stephen, the corporate report was only circulated internally. After receiving a long and at times harsh talk from his uncle, he was relocated to a plant in New Mexico and given a 2% cut in pay. In these days of progress, there was no physical copy of the internal report and its electronic version was lost when the server it was stored on happened to crash. The official IFO press report referred to a shoddy, hastily produced mainframe from China with an apparent malfunctioning back up component. Internally, a C56 secretary drone had been dispatched to that particular office and one evening went spastic and poured hundreds of cups of coffee onto the server. Whether this was coincidence or intentional will never be known as the internal report for this mishap managed to get lost as well.

While David Barsham never aspired to be famous, he was briefly mentioned on VXZMY News, which was channel 67890564 for those who have misplaced their programming guides. During the "Wrap Up" section which only aired once on Wednesday nights at 3:15 AM, the following report was announced by an android news anchor: *There was a slight chemical spill at an Oakland based IFO plant earlier today. IFO's investigation unit has confirmed that the accident was caused by a leak in a containment vessel which the firm imported from Russia. Also, an employee, a Mr. David Barsham [Please note that the android incorrectly pronounced his name as Bars-Ham] went missing around noon today. IFO corporation requests that their headquarters be contacted immediately if he happens to be seen. In other news, a peaceful protest turned violent this evening.....*