

The Future Soon

by Jim MacQuarrie

Based on a song by Jonathan Coulton

Last week I left a note on Laura's desk; it read "I love you. Signed, Anonymous Friend." I had considered a number of possible approaches since the beginning of the school year, when I first saw her sitting one row over and two seats in front of me. This arrangement gave me roughly a profile view of her, especially when she turned to talk to her friend Sue, who sat in front of Glen who sat in front of me. The seating arrangement offered a bit of cover; if she felt someone looking at her and glanced back to see who it was, I had time to snap my eyes forward and focus on whatever Mister Hammond was talking about. Neither Laura nor anyone else would know that I was "checking her out."

Seventh grade is hard enough for most kids; this is the time when many boys decide that they've developed an immunity to cooties and want to get to know the carriers better, and when girls decide that maybe the gross barbarians aren't so gross after all. To complicate matters, the negotiation between any two members of the warring tribes must be mutual and negotiated through friends; if a girl likes a boy, she can't just say so. She has to ask a friend to find out if the boy likes her before she will concede that she likes him back. Likewise, the friend cannot simply ask the boy directly; she has to ask one of the boy's friends, who then has to inquire. The boy is in a more difficult state; he has to deny the attraction in a way that contradicts his claims, sending along the coded message through the proper channels. He can't admit to his friend that he likes a girl until after the girl's friend has initiated the conversation and relayed back the message that his unspoken affection has been accepted. Failure to follow protocol will result in public humiliation. It's a tribal ritual that goes back to caveman days.

Naturally, this system depends on a few crucial components; the girl needs a friend who won't talk her out of her interest and steer her toward a more deserving candidate, and the boy needs a friend period. As a general rule, boys in seventh grade who are short and nerdy and read too many books and have a prodigious vocabulary that they insist on flaunting are usually lacking in the friend department. The one or two they have may be even weirder and nerdier than they are. This pretty much guarantees that no girl is going to talk to them, even to convey a message to a friend. And so it is that I had no way to determine whether or not Laura even knew who I was, let alone whether or not she might consider asking Sue to ask Glen whether or not I liked her. Which I did. A secret I guarded zealously, since whatever meager social position I had was utterly dependent on not being publicly known as "the pathetic nerd who mopes over Laura," Which I was.

My plan made sense. By leaving an anonymous note, I could declare my feelings without revealing myself, and Laura would then have to try to figure out who wrote the note. I figured that a girl as popular as she was would have a long list of possible suspects, and several confidants who could make inquiries for her, and eventually one of them would get to me and the time-honored ritual of negotiation would begin.

Or not.

Laura read the note, rolled her eyes, glanced at me with an unhappy expression, handed the note to Sue and whispered something. By lunchtime, it seemed the entire school was well aware of my miscalculation. The boys made kissing noises and openly mocked, while the girls just shook their heads and sneered "as if." Laura didn't have anything to say at all; she seemed to want to avoid hurting my feelings, at least not directly. She worked hard to give the appearance of avoiding me while working hard to avoid me. Obviously, I had put her on the spot. Less obviously, she had cut out my heart and

displayed it for the bloodthirsty crowd, holding it above her head in a show of victory.

At morning recess the next day, she sent her emissary to find out if Brian liked her, and by the end of the day, negotiations were completed and the usual gang of idiots had something new with which to taunt me, the fact that Brian and Laura were now a couple, apparently for the sole purpose of spiting me.

Saturday was Dave's birthday party, and his parents had rented the Holiday Ice Rink for the occasion. Dave wasn't a particularly close friend, but I'd known him since Kindergarten and he was obligated to invite me and I was obligated to go. At least there would be cake, ice cream, a goodie bag and free ice skating, so it wasn't a total loss, even though Laura and her new boyfriend would be there. I thought I could get through the afternoon with some remnant of my dignity intact. In fact, I had formulated a plan; I had convinced Glen to swear that the whole note business was in fact a dare, his idea and not something I would ever have considered, I didn't really like her anyway. That was my story and I was determined to stick to it. That is, if I ever got a chance to tell it to anyone. By this time, a sort of detente had settled in, everyone awkwardly pretending that no such thing had ever happened, and that their treating me as some sort of freak was more to do with the fact that I was some sort of freak and not because I had violated the ancient and sacred protocol of adolescent relationships. I was therefore obligated to keep my transparent explanation to myself and accept my new social status as "the weird kid."

I did okay at it until the rink's DJ/announcer called for kids to hit the ice for "Couples Skate." I sat on a bench watching boys and girls go past, until Laura and Brian went by, he grinning idiotically at my misery, she with a look mingled pity and disdain in her eyes. I felt my face reddening as I looked away.

I resolved in that moment to prove myself undeserving of that look. I would show her what she had rejected.

Life went on, and I threw myself into academics. Over time, I changed my social status from Nerd to Brain, a slight step up the ladder. As time passed, I found myself at least marginally respected when I won the annual Science Fair, earning a trip to Space Camp.

By the end of high school, everyone pretty much forgot the whole note business. People moved into different cliques based on shared interests and temperament, and it seemed I hardly ever saw Laura anymore; I was in the Honors classes while she was a cheerleader and on track to go to a state college and an eventual career in marketing or hotel management or cosmetology or some such. I was still in love with her, but I had learned to live with it.

After graduating high school, I went to Cal Tech, majoring in biology with a minor in robotics; I had decided to enter the field of cybernetics, the augmentation and/or replacement of limbs and organs by man-made components. I felt that this emerging field would give me the best opportunity to achieve the kind of success I needed. I was going to be somebody important.

My doctoral thesis was on translating cerebral activity into speech; I invented an electronic voicebox that would do exactly that. It would be useful for people with severe neuromuscular disorders that prevented speech, cancer survivors and accident victims who had lost larynx or vocal cords, and other sad cases. It might even allow babies to vocalize their thoughts. What I never told anyone was that my primary goal was to make dolphins talk, primarily because Laura liked dolphins. As it turned out, dolphins don't really have anything interesting to say. They are, as we thought, reasonably intelligent,

but they're basically frat jocks. All they care about is having fun and eating and sex. Lots and lots of it. Dolphins are really hedonists, as it turns out. But at least my invention worked, and had enough commercial applications to make me pretty well off financially. I was able to choose my own areas of research from then on.

Muscular augmentation was what I chose. There are still a lot of jobs that have to be done by people, due to either circumstances or economics, and stronger people would be able to do the job more efficiently than machinery. Not incidentally, it would also allow me to improve myself. I had always been considered "puny," and if my research would allow me to add size and strength, all the better. It turned out that a lot of people felt the same way, and a booming market emerged for cybernetic muscles as an alternative to spending years in a gym. Before very long, I was insanely rich. I was also six-foot-four and 220 pounds, able to bench-press a Hummer, and an international celebrity.

My research also had applications for space exploration. Augmented humans could tolerate more extremes of temperature and pressure than ordinary people, and NASA became a big client. Before too long, I established a research facility for myself on a decommissioned space station; I had found that metal alloys created in zero gravity had some very useful properties. As a bonus, it also offered me some distance from the tedious mass of humanity.

My work branched into new areas. As I continued to develop my cybernetic technology, I realized that it was possible to engineer an artificial human. I gathered and digested the existing knowledge of artificial intelligence, and realized that it is possible to create a computer that learns over time. Within a few years, I had built a prototype. Robot, android, replicant... whatever you want to call it, I had a humanoid biped who could do most of the things that a person can do, and a lot of things that people can't. The military was suitably impressed by his performance, and contracted me to produce a soldier model. I came up with a great one; seven feet tall, with laser cannon, grenade-launcher and a chainsaw built into the arms. They were virtually indestructible warriors. Of course I programmed them with Asimov's Laws of Robotics, the classic rules intended to protect human life.

In a relatively short time, the robots' artificial intelligence led them to conclude that the best way to protect human life was by subjugating the whole human race. Worldwide robotic domination would, in their reasoning, produce a world in which humans could come to no harm. They immediately rebelled against the military, seizing control of their bases and instituting their containment policies and police actions.

Needless to say, the people of Earth were unhappy about this development and fought back. The "Robot War" lasted for about four months, resulting in massive casualties among both military personnel and civilians. The tide was turned when I was able to create a "conscience virus" that altered the robots' programming, amending the Asimov Laws to include personal liberty as another area of human life that must be protected. I passed the code along to a resistance cell that was able to implement it. After that, it was a relatively simple matter to deactivate their weapons systems and render them harmless, after which most of them were put to work rebuilding the damaged infrastructure of the major cities.

An investigation ruled that I was not responsible for the Robot War; simulations found that without my inclusion of the Asimov Laws, the robots would have concluded that the most effective way to win the war for which they were built would be to destroy the human race entirely. The government concluded that I had actually saved the planet, while the military commanders who commissioned the robots were actually responsible for the damage. I still felt responsible, and decided to continue attempting to

improve life on earth.

Not everyone agreed with the findings of the commission; some people felt that as the inventor, I should have realized the inherent danger of creating such lethal robots, and should have refused the contract at the outset. Maybe I should have, but that's really the kind of thing one realizes after the fact. Nonetheless, I received a number of death threats and even a couple of attempts.

Some time after the hearing, I received a message from Laura. She wanted to see me; was I still the "sweet, shy boy she knew in school"? She apologized for not understanding me back then. Of course I responded. After dozens of videophone conversations over the next week, we arranged a date. I'd meet her at the train platform near the ruins of the old Sears Tower in Chicago.

My heart was racing as the shuttle came in for landing; I could feel my pulse where the enhancements to my arms interfaced with my circulatory system. I was nervous! Here I am, the richest, most successful person in the world, the greatest inventor of my generation, and I'm nervous about seeing a girl I'd known since I was twelve years old. I tried to calm myself as I exited the spacecraft.

I spotted her standing near the monorail station. She smiled as I approached, and suddenly I was back in junior high school; she looked almost the same as when we were in school, and I remembered why I was so in love with her. When I got closer, I saw that there was something that had changed; her eyes looked different. Where before they had been a bright emerald green, now they were a more muted hazel green-brown color.

"Bionics," she explained, seeing the confusion on my face. She had been blinded by a robot's laser blast, but the doctors were able to restore her sight using the advanced optical receptors I had created for the robots. I apologized reflexively; she said, "it's not your fault... is it?" Suddenly the atmosphere changed; it seemed as if the temperature had dropped a bit. I was once again that awkward kid she had last seen several years ago. I didn't know how to answer her. I considered arguing that though I had created the robots, I had also stopped them, and had created the bionic eyes that she was currently using, but I knew that line of reasoning wouldn't end up anywhere I wanted to be. I cleared my throat and suggested we go to dinner. I led her to the shuttle.

"Instead of a dull restaurant, why don't we go back to my place?" I suggested, adding that the view of Earth from the solar deck is spectacular. She agreed, so I signaled ahead for the kitchen robots to prepare a meal. As we flew to my orbiting home, we chatted about how each of us had changed over the years. It seemed to me that she hadn't changed at all, while I had actively pursued change, had done everything I could to change myself, to get as far as I could away from that weak and strange little kid I used to be. As we talked, Laura kept giving me these sideways looks and occasionally smiling. "What?" I asked.

"You haven't changed as much as you think you have," she said. "I still see the boy I knew."

Later, after we finished our meal, I gave her a tour of my home and laboratory. We ended up at the solar deck, where we could look down on the Earth and see the sun peeking out from behind it on the left as the moon hung in the sky on the right. Below us, the Pacific coast, its thousands of lights still shining in the pre-dawn, looked like a blanket of stars. I put my arm around Laura and leaned my head in. As I did so, she must have heard the machinery inside my cyborg body, because she suddenly flinched and stepped away from me, a barely-concealed look of revulsion on her face.

I advanced toward her, and she turned and ran. Naturally I'm a lot faster now, so I caught up to her quickly, just as she entered my lab. I had her cornered now, her look of horror replaced by one of fright. I tried to soothe her, moving slowly and speaking softly. She seemed to relax. "What are you going to do?" she asked nervously.

"I'm not going to do anything to you. I love you. I always have. I want you to stay here with me."

She looked at me, and slowly her demeanor changed. She was no longer frightened, a shy smile playing at the corner of her mouth. "So, what, are you asking me to marry you?"

"If you'll have me," I responded. She stepped toward me, pulled herself close to me, putting her arms around my neck and drawing her face close to mine. As her lips approached mine, I felt a buzzing sensation and my whole body went limp.

Laura stepped back from me and smirked. "Cybernetic neutralizer," she explained. She had attached a small device to the back of my neck, which jammed all the electric impulses in my bionic nerves. I couldn't move a muscle. I was trapped in my own body, helpless and weak.

She paced around me, clucking her tongue and making "tsk" noises.

"I'm supposed to kill you," she began, "but I'm not going to. There's no point, and I don't hate you. The Resistance leaders felt I would have the best chance of getting to you, and all they really want is to make sure you can't unleash another horror on us like you did before."

"That was a programming error," I stammered. "I never meant for the robots to do any harm; they were supposed to protect you."

"Me?"

"Well, yes. Everybody, really, but I did it for you."

"You don't even know me."

"Of course I know you. I love you."

"No, you don't. You love the idea of me. You were lonely, down on yourself, and looking for somebody who could rescue you from yourself while allowing you to play the hero. You were in love with the notion of being in love, and you chose me as the focus of your attention. But you never really knew me, because I was only incidental to your fantasy. Let's look at that note you wrote me back in school: 'I love you, signed anonymous friend.' What am I supposed to do with that? What reaction were you expecting? Was I supposed to figure out who wrote it and then come to you, throw myself at you and declare my love for you? Of course not. You didn't want a reaction from me at all; you just wanted an opening so that if you ever worked up the courage, you could announce that it was you and sweep me off my feet. But it doesn't work like that. Love demands risk and vulnerability and trust. You didn't trust me; if you did, you would have at least signed the note, or even better, actually spoken to me once in a while. I saw you sitting there, watching me, looking away whenever I made eye contact. You know what? I thought you were kind of cute at first, a little shy maybe, but you were starting to creep me out. What you showed me wasn't love, it was obsession. You weren't thinking about me, you were thinking about yourself and how I could make you feel and what I could do for you. Your every action was

intended to protect yourself, to provide deniability, to never take a chance or expose your real feelings to me or to anyone else.”

“Y'know what?” she continued, “if you had just walked up to me and asked me to go to a movie or roller skating or even just to play Monopoly, I would have said yes. But you couldn't take a chance. You thought I would shoot you down, and feared that the rejection could be too great. But the truth is, if you had any genuine feelings for me as a person, you would have been willing to risk it.”

I stood frozen in place, forced to listen to her, and I knew she was right. I didn't love her, but I was starting to. I was admiring her; her honesty, her understanding, and her lack of hostility or anger. I realized that I had in fact used and mistreated her all those years ago, and had continued to do so right up until now. “I see,” was all I managed to say.

“Do you?” Laura asked. “Do you see? Do you see how simple it could have been, and how difficult you made it? And do you know why? Fear, that's why. Fear of loneliness, fear of rejection, fear of your own emotions. And where did that get you? Living alone on this satellite, rejected by the entire Earth, living in a body that's half artificial, and for what?”

“I wanted to be somebody.”

“Who? Who did you want to be?”

“Somebody important. Somebody not me.”

“Oh, so you didn't like yourself. Let me ask you a question... if you didn't like yourself, why would you possibly expect me to?”

“...”

“Do you like yourself any better now?”

“Not really.”

“That's a shame, because there's really a lot to like, even of the little that's still you. And that's really the root of your problem anyway. You were afraid of rejection because you had already rejected yourself, and that gave everybody else permission to reject you, and you knew it. If you had given yourself a chance, a lot of people would have liked you. All the girls thought you were cute but weird. Some of them even tried to flirt with you a little but you never noticed. You were too busy being down on yourself and taking it as a given that everybody else was also down on you. They weren't. They thought you were funny and sometimes even sweet, when you let the shields down and your real personality peeked out. You could have been the most popular kid in class if you hadn't been so busy beating yourself up or defending yourself from imaginary attacks that never came.”

My mouth hung open as I considered her words; I reviewed my memories of school and childhood, and found that apart from a small group of oafish thugs, I never received any ill treatment from the majority of my schoolmates. Most of our interactions consisted of me turning away from them and trying to drive them off before they could hurt me. Now it dawned on me that they never wanted to.

“Here's the thing about fear: it's useful when there's something to actually be afraid of, but it messes

you up when you're afraid of things you've imagined and think might possibly happen, and you're really in trouble if you let your fears decide your actions. Any decision you make out of fear is pretty likely to be wrong. Fear comes from having nobody to trust. If you had trusted yourself, maybe you could have trusted me, and all our lives might have been very different.”

“Goodbye,” she said. “I have to knock you out now so you don't try to come after me. I'll remove the neutralizer while you're unconscious, after I've destroyed your lab, and I'll be gone before you come to.”

She reached for the device, something buzzed, and everything went black.

“Hey, you okay?”

I looked around. I was standing along the rail at the skating rink. Glen was standing beside me. “You kind of zoned out there for a minute.”

“I'm fine. Excuse me a minute, I need to go talk to somebody.” I spotted Laura by the snack bar and made my way over to her. She watched me with some apprehension as I approached.

“Listen, I'm sorry about that note,” I said, “it was really stupid. I was just afraid to talk to you.”

She looked at me for a minute, then asked, “so what's changed?”

“I don't know... I guess I grew up a little.”

She looked at me again, those bright emerald eyes seeming to look inside me. “That's good,” she said, smiling a little. “You needed to.”