Hands of Steel

Norman Hayes had a problem. It was a problem that plagued him every day of his fourth-grade life in Scottsville Elementary School. It was a problem that had no real solution, and it was a problem that *especially* got worse during lunch, when his problem sat two seats down and to his left. His problem was named Millie B. Johnson, and in his eyes, she was the most beautiful person in the world. She was also almost completely unaware of his existence.

Norman was not a confident boy. Nor was he too articulate of the multitude of feelings circulating in his 9-year-old body. Even if he had friends to talk about it with, he wouldn't have found the right words. He knew it to be true.

One day, he tried to do something about it. At recess, he noticed that Millie and her friends were socializing in the corner of the schoolyard. Nervously, Norman walked towards them.

They became silent at his approach. "What do you want?" asked one of the girls, standoffishly. Millie's blue eyes glinted as she looked at him.

Norman tried unsuccessfully to produce a sound, but failed. He stood in place, wrung his hands, and then quickly turned around and walked back into the school building. "That was weird," said one of the girls, and shortly they resumed their normal level of chit-chat and laughing.

Norman sat in one of the bathroom stalls and cried.

The next day, he tried again. He approached the poor girl at lunch, looked at the back of her head, and, to appease some nameless internal demon, pulled sharply on one of the locks of her hair. She yelped, and turned around with a fearful look in her eyes. Immediately, Norman knew he had made a mistake. She started crying, and the teacher was called. Norman was sent home for the day.

He had never experienced such dejection. He spent the next few weeks sulking, moping, contemplating, pondering, trying to determine where he went wrong. In computer class, which was his favorite class of the day, he tried his last-resort option. Opening his internet browser, Norman typed the following request into the search engine:

```
Why do girls not like me?
```

And the internet responded, cordially:

```
CONTENT BLOCKED BY YOUR SYSTEM ADMINISTRATOR
```

Damn.

Norman Hayes had another problem. And this one was nothing compared to the juvenile infatuations of his childhood. He was in *love*, and her name was Sarah Springfield. She sat right in front of him in Honors English, and every adolescent hormone in his body was invariably attracted to her. He liked her smile, the way she answered questions in class, and especially how she looked leaving the classroom each day.

"What do I do?" Norman asked one of his friends during a computer class that they shared.

"Tell her how you feel? I'm not sure. I've never asked out a girl before." responded the friend.

And Norman Hayes did not. He was nervous. Insecure. Plagued by the shadow of Millie and his only previous attempt to woo a member of the opposite sex. Every day in English class he would attempt to build up the confidence to talk to Sarah, and every day he would fail. He settled into a comfortable rhythm of observing her from the background, dreaming of a chance occurrence that would bring them together or a day where *she* would be the one to talk to *him*.

Sarah Springfield was not oblivious to this, of course. She felt the pressure of his gaze on the back of her neck, and saw the way he watched her as she walked. She felt bad for him - she was very popular at Scottsville high school, and Norman Hayes was not high on her list of potential suitors.

One day, near the end of the year, the unthinkable happened. Norman turned the corner to the hallway that his English classroom was in, and saw Sarah standing near the doorway. Talking to a boy. Laughing with a boy. Holding hands with a boy. Giving his hand a gentle squeeze as she turned to enter the classroom.

Norman Hayes missed Honors English class that day.

He sat, in his computer class, halfheartedly listening to the lecture his teacher was giving over the potential implications of artificial intelligence and the massive upsurgence of machine learning in recent years. Norman flicked on the plasma monitor at his workstation, instantly opening communication with the educationAI open-source conversational model designed to provide friendly assistance to students. Using the wireless laser-keyboard interface provided to each member of the class, Norman posed the following query to the network:

```
Why don't girls like me?
```

And 50 terabytes of cloud-based language processing nodes responded, cordially:

```
There might be many reasons why romantic advances are not reciprocated.
However, this topic of conversation is not grounded in academic pursuit.
Let's talk about something else!
```

Damn.

Norman Hayes, unsurprisingly, had another problem. He was getting tired of problems.

She worked alongside him at RobotiCo. He was one of the developers that fine-tuned the information-gathering abilities of androids equipped with quantum neural-maps versions 2.04.06e and later. She handled debugging and functional testing.

Norman was done living a life of fear. One day, as they closed operations in development facility 4B, he walked up to her.

He made small talk for a bit before popping the question.

"You know, I really enjoy talking to you and you seem great. Would you like to accompany me to lunch at that new Italian place downtown this weekend?"

Her face fell. "*Nor*man," she said, drawing out the first syllable in his name a tad too long. "You seem sweet, but I just don't like you like that. I mean in that way. You know what I mean. At any rate, I think it's best if we just keep things professional and in the workplace? Don't you?"

Her blue eyes peered into his, hoping to find any glimpse of respite. They did not.

Norman Hayes arrived at his apartment on a warpath. He slammed the door, and brusquely shoved his way past the Home/Maintenance android, HM-908-02, politely and silently waiting to take his cap.

"Is everything alright, Master Hayes?" asked the robot, in a voice instantly and perfectly calculated to contain the ideal socially-acceptable level of concern.

"Shut up. Just shut up."

The quantum neural-map present in the cranial space of android model HM-908-02 sent a request to the infrared/Multi-Vis robo-optic sensors it was equipped with, assessed the situation quickly via pinging the cloud-based informational network it was connected to, and instructed

the robot to follow a few steps behind Norman Hayes to his eventual descent in the large armchair in the living room next to his reading stand, ready to provide support.

Norman sat with his head in his hands for a few minutes.

"Why don't women ever like me? Why am I never chosen?"

HM-908-02 possessed a quantum processor designed to provide the maximal amount of realistic emotional assistance.

"There are many reasons why you might not be the target of one's romantic desires, Master Hayes. Many of them may not even be related to you as an individual. Regardless, I am sorry this has happened to you. Is there any way I can be of help?"

And an idea was sparked in the mind of Norman Hayes.

He worked feverishly. Without abandon. He called in sick two days in a row, three days in a row, four, five. He was eventually let go from his job. He didn't care. He was close to a breakthrough.

In the apartment of Norman Hayes, HM-908-02 was undergoing a drastic transformation. Its legs and arms were the first to be changed, the light blue tint of android appendages being swapped for the strikingly familiar hue of human flesh. It wasn't, of course, but underground android part manufacturers had managed to craft replacements that were scarily similar in color and feel. The skull-mount, which housed the cranial space for the quantum neural-map, was fitted with cherry-blonde synthetic hair and set aside for the moment. The polycarbonate face-plate, designed to replicate the facial image that people associate with harmless roboticism merely adjacent to humanity, was replaced with an after-market pseudorealistic silicone mold of a woman's face: complete with piercing blue eyes, a slight blush in the cheeks, and plump, sultry-red lips that sat ever-so-slightly open when the mechanical jaw-bone was in the 'closed' position.

The combined torso and pelvis plate, of course, was the most expensive after-market part of the entire system.

Norman was in love already.

He returned to the skull-mount. Connecting it to the global database of quantum neural-map modifications, he browsed relentlessly. First he downloaded the `witty.conversationalist` open-source modification. Then the `romantic.banter` modification. Norman dove deeper. The

'`seductive.mode.v3`' modification. Deeper. Norman was visiting webpages that, 30 minutes prior, he hadn't known existed. The '`robot.erotic.XXX`' modification. His eyes widened as he read the description. He took a brief pause from his work.

Finally, Norman was done. He thumbed the cerebral activation switch on the back of the head of his creation. Silently, blue eyes looked up at him. Synthetic lips smiled at him. A tender hand reached mechanically for his cheek, and felt tears.

Norman was happy. He returned to work, no longer as a developer, but as a city-maintenance man. His coworkers noticed that he always seemed to keep to himself with a curious contentment about him, but didn't think too much of it.

The years passed. Norman spent much time at home with Sarah. The name had seemed fitting. They spoke. They made love. They cooked. They watched movies. They read books. They made love again.

Norman was dying. Sarah knew this, deep in her quantum-processing information banks. He was old, and laying on the couch struggling to breathe. She walked over to him. She sat down next to his head. Wordlessly, he shifted his head to be on her lap. Norman, with eyes yellowed around the edges, cheeks covered in liver spots, and a forehead wrinkled with age, looked up into the face that hadn't changed since the day it had arrived in his mailbox. He was content. Slowly, he closed his eyelids, and Norman Hayes was no more.

Somewhere far away, in a place devoid of human touch, nestled beneath layers of concrete and crawling with wires and circuitry, a file named `norman_hayes_26385.txt` was quietly archived.