

“Circuits and Wires”
By: Anthony Iannaccio

The AutoWay came to a dead stop. A thick haze of black smoke now covered most of the road. I stumbled to the far end of it, the scent of burning rubber and melting plastic in the air making it difficult to breathe. On the left side of the road, the sun glistened off of Andy's turquoise bike, its front tire severely bent to one side. *But where was Andy?* As a strong gust of wind blew across my field of vision, I saw pieces of jagged metal and frayed wire scattered across the road. An ear-shattering silence was broken by a sharp, metallic symphony in the distance. It approached slowly. *Cl-clank. Cl-clank. Cl-clank.* Something round and small rolling towards me. In my disoriented state, I had trouble telling what it was. “Is it a ball?” I mistakenly thought. I wish it had been. I wish it were absolutely anything other than what I saw.

Today started out as normal as any other day. It was a Tuesday, and everyone knows nothing interesting ever happened on a *Tuesday*. Up until about twenty minutes ago, I'd be right about that. We headed out to the tennis courts the way we used to do every normal, boring Tuesday afternoon when school was over (and sometimes during school too). Andy and I would ride our bikes down this beautifully paved, winding path that cut along the highway to get to Optimus Park, one of the last remaining parks in the state. I liked this particular path to the park because there were so many trees. Seemingly boundless swathes of pine and oak covered our field of vision everywhere we turned. It's not often you get to feel so in touch with nature living in the city. This was the closest we ever got. We would ride up and down the rollercoaster-like hills, never worrying about the cars zooming over one-hundred miles an hour literally feet away from us.

Our city recently got the self-driving automated highway or, “AutoWay,” installed a few months back, but people weren't even used to cars driving by themselves yet, let alone an entire *highway*. Hammond Industries, the company that built the AutoWay, assured us time and

time again that it was completely safe. Each car was equipped with a special built-in sensor to immediately brake if any living creature was within its radius, so it was impossible for a person to get hit. My mother, always untrusting of new technology—as most adults are— wouldn't even let me ride my bike the first month the AutoWay was operational. "Robbie, those cars have a mind of their own, but so do I, and it's telling me not to let you anywhere near them," she would say. That's the thing about moms, the second you step one foot out of the house, they think you're going to die.

"Wait up... Andy." The gears of my bike made that familiar *click click click* as I trudged up the steep hill, panting. Andy was *fast*. If you ever caught him lagging behind, it was only for my sake. No matter how long we rode for and no matter how hard we played tennis, he always had this tremendous amount of energy, like a small supernova was burning in the center of his chest. He was taller and more in shape than me, with cropped light-brown hair, and dark blue eyes that always seemed to be piercing your soul. Next to me with my messy dark brown hair, stubby legs and slightly too large for my face nose, Andy stood out. I was a *Hobbit* and he was like a model.

"If I knew I was riding with my grandma today, I would've brought you flowers." Andy shifted gears on his turquoise bike and was out of sight before I got halfway up the hill. As always, he was there waiting for me at the bottom with that huge grin of his.

"Geez, Robbie. You need me to get you training wheels or somethin'? Maybe some ribbons to stick inside your handlebars? Oh! What about a nice little white basket with a pretty floral pattern to stick on the front of your bike? You know, now that I think about it, that would be a great place to hold your diapers and ba-ba."

"Screw you, man! That was a really steep hill."

"*Screw you, man! That was a really steep hill,*" mocked Andy.

"I don't sound anything like that... shut up." But to be fair, it was actually a decent impression of my voice. Andy was *great* at impressions. Just another item to add to the long list of things Andy was better at than me.

"I'm just messing with you, dude. Don't tell me you've become an android and lost your sense of humor?" he said with no inflection in his tone. Andy brought his arms close to his ribcage and stiffly moved them up and down, chopping the air slowly with closed fingers.

I sighed. *Here we go again.*

"You know androids have a sense of humor just like anyone else, Andy."

Humor was programmed into most models back during the early stages of android development. Of course, that was before they became advanced enough to understand humor autonomously, not too long after the first android achieved consciousness. My father was a senior android technician for Hammond Industries, an android doctor of sorts, and would tell me everything he knew about them, so I was pretty well versed when it came to androids and their history.

"Right, right... and my refrigerator is touring the country doing stand-up comedy. You should hear his set about ice cubes. It had me in pieces." If sarcasm was an art, Andy was its Van Gogh.

"That's not the same thing, Andy. A refrigerator's just a machine. An android is a living, conscious being. You know that."

A large snort of air left Andy's nostrils. "Like I said, no sense of humor."

Lately, Andy seemed to have a vendetta against androids, which to me, made absolutely no sense. Androids have been an integral part of our lives since we were kids and were around since before we were even born. They were initially created as an automated workforce, but as our technology became more sophisticated, so did they. I've had babysitters, bus drivers, even doctors that were androids and I've had absolutely no issues with any of them. Our English teacher from sophomore year, Ms. Bender, also happened to be an android. Except in her case,

we weren't aware of that until... well, until it was too late. See, the thing with androids is that nowadays, you can hardly tell the newer models apart from humans. Some people claim that certain androids have "tells" that immediately give them away, but if you ask me, like all ignorant people, they have no idea what they're talking about. Although androids live alongside us peacefully and go about their day-to-day lives just as any normal human would, those very same people deem them "dangerous" and believe they attack our rights and freedoms as humans, or "The Sanctity of Humanity" as they like to call it.

Give me a break.

Just before the enormous hill that crossed the eight-lane AutoWay and led directly into Optimus Park, Andy and I stopped at a bench on the side of the road so I could catch my breath.

"How do you stay... in such good shape, Andy?"

"Easy. Eat right. Exercise. Be born in peak physical condition. And of course, the most important thing: not whining like a little baby every five seconds."

"Have I ever told you how much of an asshole you are?"

"Oh yeah, I'm the asshole because I'm *ripped* and you're out of breath by the time you finish the first level of *Super Galaxy Crushers*."

Andy flexed both biceps to rub it in a little more. My face flushed red.

"Well, that game is impossible to beat and everyone knows it."

"Yeah, if you're four years old... and blind."

Since our sophomore year at Asimov High, we would come to this same old, worn-out bench every week to sit and work out whatever was bugging us with life at the moment. Girls, homework, parents, politics... we talked about it *all*. We named it the, "Thinking Bench," and it was one of our few escapes from the outside world. On the Thinking Bench, we were cocooned

in our own bubble, safe from the dangers and problems of reality. But recently, it became more of a pulpit for Andy to preach his anti-android rhetoric.

At the far end of the bench, just out of earshot, a tall, slender looking man with long, snow white hair and magnifying lens glasses that rested on the bridge of his nose took a seat. He sipped tea out of a small white cup he held gently in his hands. Andy, brow furrowed, gave him a long, cold stare out of the corner of his eyes. Under his breath he whispered, "He's one of them."

"One of who?" I asked.

He gave me the same look. "You know exactly who I'm talking about. One of *them*. He's... an android," he said, as if he had a waterfall of vomit curdling in the back of his throat, just waiting to gush out.

"You're joking, right? How can you even tell? He looks like a regular old guy to me. Could even be my grandpa."

"Just look at him," Andy whispered as he stared intently at the old man.

The old man slowly pulled out a long, black wire from an unnoticeable compartment concealed in the side of his ribs and plugged it into a small port in the side of the bench. He turned his head slowly in our direction and gave us a soft, closed-lipped smile. From where we were standing, you could hear the whirs and clicks of the worndown mechanisms in his head as he turned.

"Fine day we're having, isn't it?" he said as he lightly raised his cup of tea. The audio quality of his voice had somehow deteriorated and each word came out sounding choppy and methodical. I nodded and waved. Andy couldn't wipe the intense look of disgust from his face.

"He's an older model, but he's still one of them."

"Alright, so what's the big deal? He's an android. Just let him be. He's probably just uploading today's news into his hard drive. He's not bothering anyone. Mind your business, dude."

At that moment, Andy had a look on his face as if he was about to punch either me, or the old man. I had never seen Andy switch gears so fast in my life.

“Mind my business? How am I supposed to mind my business when this... this *roidie* is sitting five feet away from me?” Andy shouted, with an intensity I’d rarely seen him use.

“Would you calm down, man? Geez, what the hell’s gotten into you lately?”

Andy and I became friends the summer before we started our freshman year at Asimov High. It was that weird transition between middle and high school where you still feel like a kid before the next four years completely reshape the rest of your life. My life would be re-shaped by a chance encounter with Andy at Optimus Park.

I would go to the tennis courts alone almost every day and practice serving, which I was absolutely terrible at. Andy was also alone a few courts down, serving perfectly to the empty side opposite him. Surprisingly, Andy was the one to approach me. He introduced himself and immediately began teaching me how to play tennis, without me even having to ask. Andy was calm, considerate, and, as hard as this is to believe, had the patience of a saint. He always had kind words to share and if he saw anyone else on the court struggling, he would be the first to help them out—all the while sporting that signature smile of his.

That summer I learned what it meant to be a good tennis player and an even better friend. It might be hard to see now, but Andy was one of the nicest, most thoughtful people I had ever met. If it wasn’t for Optimus Park, I might still be playing tennis alone. It was a sacred place to us.

We started coming to the Thinking Bench not long after that. It was our sophomore year, not too long after the *incident*. That is, the incident involving our homeroom teacher, Ms. Bender. She was hands-down one of the most insightful, compassionate teachers I’d ever had, and she was an android. We knew that from day one and no one in my class ever seemed to mind that

fact, especially Andy. He was without question Ms. Bender's biggest supporter and would passionately defend her if anyone ever had something negative to say, especially when it came to her being an android. Andy was a foster kid and I think Ms. Bender felt like the closest thing he ever had to a mom. Ms. Bender made us feel like people, not just students in a classroom. Our thoughts and ideas mattered and our problems weren't dismissed off-hand. If it wasn't for what happened, most of us honestly would've probably forgotten she was even an android. It just wasn't a concern. She taught us *poetry* for God's sake.

One day, during lunch hour, Ms. Bender was plugged into the school's main server, uploading that afternoon's lesson plan. She didn't have to eat, so it was something that was done every day at this time. Ms. Bender had an older processor that had this antiquated way of uploading data which paralyzed all of her motor and cognitive functions until the upload was complete. In a way it was like her naptime where she got to dream her lesson for the rest of that day. Because of this, she had absolutely no way of stopping or even being aware of the travesty that was about to occur, something I'm sure the culprit was well aware of.

We were told after the fact that someone entered the classroom, hacked the school's security system and sealed the room from the inside. Even if someone found out what was happening in time and wanted to stop it, it would have been virtually impossible. The unknown assailant, who clearly knew about her outdated processor, then proceeded to cut off the wire connected to Ms. Bender, mid-upload. Unfortunately, the fatal design flaw for Ms. Bender's processor is that, if you unplug or interrupt the android model at any point during data synchronization, there's a 99% chance that all of their data becomes corrupted and the android effectively shuts down. A secondary design flaw also makes it impossible to retrieve any of their data that may have previously been backed up. Something about interrupting data synchronization shorts out part of the processor. To put it bluntly, it *kills* them.

To this day, Hammond Industries has yet to recall the processor, citing cost issues and "lack of public interest in the matter."

The media and law enforcement, especially in our state, largely ignore android attacks like the one done to Ms. Bender. Those of us who support androids can see the clear disregard for android life that permeates our local and state governments. This prejudice is largely due to the religious presence in my state, but the issue extends throughout the entire country.

The unknown person was never identified or caught, and so no one was ever brought to justice. All that was found at the scene of the crime was a tear-dropped shaped crimson sticker with a bright yellow cross in the middle. The symbol belongs to a radical Christian organization called the "Soldiers of Flesh," but that apparently wasn't enough evidence to implicate them in the crime. Ms. Bender, unfortunately, was permanently shut down and from that point forward, every teacher around the country was legally required either to register as human or non-human.

Andy took the death of Ms. Bender the hardest out of anyone I knew. He stopped coming to school for weeks. When he finally came back, he burst into tears the moment he saw me. "Why would someone do that to her? How could someone be so monstrous? No one cared about us more than her! She didn't deserve that, Robbie. No android does."

Based on Andy's attitude as of late, I've started to wonder if that was all just for show, if Andy was somehow involved in her death and was just trying to cover it up. The sad truth was that Andy just wasn't that same person anymore. Something inside of him had changed and along the way, he lost his humanity.

With his fists clenched, Andy stood up from the bench and began walking towards the old man with long, white hair. The old man paid no attention to him. He couldn't. He was as responsive as a pile of scrap metal and Andy was well aware of that.

"Andy, don't you dare do it!" I was shouting louder than I ever had in my life.

Andy kept walking towards the old man. He had this glassy, far-away look in his eyes that told me he wasn't all there. His body seemed to be shaking, almost convulsing out of anger,

and the obvious tension in his arms made it seem like he was trying to stop himself from doing something terrible. Then he reached for his pocket.

I pleaded with him. "Andy, please! You should know better than anyone else how dangerous that is. If you unplug that old man from the bench, you're going to kill him! Just slow down for a minute, man. You aren't thinking. Just leave him alone!"

But Andy refused to stop. He wouldn't even turn to look at me. All of his recent anger and hate toward the androids was boiling over.

"You think I'm about to unplug this old *roidie*? Hah!"

From out of his pocket, he pulled out a small knife. The old man with the long white hair continued to stare directly ahead, oblivious to everything that was happening.

"Andy, I'm begging you. Stop it. Right now!"

"Why should I stop? Andy stared down at the knife, then back up at the old man. "These... *things* are an abomination. They have no place among humans!"

About a month or two after Ms. Bender died, Andy disappeared again. I tried reaching out to his foster home but they wouldn't respond. I called back day after day for a week or two until someone finally said that Andy went on a vacation. I found that odd considering Andy never mentioned a vacation and on top of that the uber religious all-boys home he was part of was barely scraping by financially. What made it even stranger was that Andy wouldn't tell me anything about his "vacation." In fact, he acted as if it didn't even happen.

"Dude, what are you talking about?" he would say when I asked about it. "I've never been on a vacation in my life. Rub it in, why don't you?"

At first, I thought it was just a really weird prank Andy was pulling on me, but after a few weeks of him not even mentioning it, I dropped the issue. I figured if it was important, the truth would eventually come out. What came out instead was a lot of disgusting anti-android rhetoric. It started off as a joke here and there but eventually, it overtook his entire personality. It was

almost as if a virus had infected his mind and he developed a single-minded obsession with hurting androids. It felt like he'd been reprogrammed.

Then it got worse.

Andy started showing me these horrifying videos of people beating and dismantling androids in public. The androids would cry out in pain as the people brutally beating them would laugh hysterically and shout things like, "take that, *roidie!*" and "burn in hell, android garbage!" Andy's huge grin would appear every time he watched one of these videos. It was sickening... and he enjoyed every second of it.

Once, he showed me this video of a rally for the Soldiers of Flesh where people were torturing a group of android *toddlers* in the middle of Times Square while police officers just sat back and watched. Some of the officers stood by and laughed while the rest actively stopped any protestors or first responders from helping. It looked exactly like someone was doing the same thing to a group of human children, except all around their bodies there were these circuits sparking and wires dangling. Watching the video, I had to fight to hold back a rush of tears. I felt physically ill. "How," I would argue, "is this not murder?"

"They aren't actually alive, Robbie," he chuckled. "Power down, man."

"What do you mean 'aren't actually alive?'" I said. "*You* power down."

"You saw for yourself. They're just a bunch of circuits and wires meshed together. There ain't nothin' alive in there."

Ignorance like this always bothered me, but it was something I generally ignored to avoid getting sucked into bigoted arguments. Plus, Andy was practically my only friend and the last thing I wanted was to get into a fight with him. But on that day, it didn't matter. I wasn't going to let Andy spew his hate. I couldn't.

"So then what's the difference between that and a human, Andy? Aren't we just a bunch of nerve endings and veins meshed together?"

“Look, you can’t simplify everything that easily. Let’s put it this way, alright, we’re conscious and they’re just machines. Are you trying to tell me a machine could be conscious?”

I knew that what Andy was trying to argue was downright false, let alone outrageous. But that’s not what really bothered me. It was the way he was saying it. So nonchalantly. So confident. He was preaching to me as if it was *fact*. He didn’t or maybe couldn’t realize it was just his hateful, ignorant opinion.

“Are you telling me an android can’t be conscious? These ‘machines’ are self-aware, Andy. That means they *know* they’re alive, that they’re experiencing reality. They think for themselves and guide their actions based on those thoughts. Is that not consciousness?”

I could tell this information made Andy extremely upset. He tried to argue that androids weren’t really conscious, they’re just “programmed to be that way.” He couldn’t let go of the “fact” that androids were “just machines.” Or as he put it, “whether or not they do have consciousness, which they obviously don’t, they’re still *machines*. Machines reflecting a graven image, built by *man*. They are not creatures of *God’s* kingdom. They are an *abomination*.”

That was it. The statement that definitively proved just how deeply indoctrinated Andy had become. He was making this about religion when in fact religion had no grounds whatsoever in claiming any sort of authority on the subject. It reminded me of a small movement slowly spreading around the country involving a devout group of Baptists who claimed that androids were mentioned in scripture as works of Satan and were thought to be the heralds of Armageddon. They genuinely believed the creation of androids signified the end of the world. They were no Soldiers of Flesh, but a lot of people began feeding into their rhetoric, including Andy. I would never expect someone like him to buy into that garbage. I mean c’mon, androids in the *Bible*?

I wanted to stop the argument before I said something I wouldn’t be able to take back, so I dropped it. Of course, Andy took that as him being the “winner,” but in reality, I couldn’t help but think less of him. He had changed so completely in such a short amount of time and it was

honestly starting to terrify me. How could someone I'd known for so long, someone who I thought was intelligent, who I called my *best friend*, be so... so *stupid*? In my mind, I chalked up his sudden personality change to the power and persuasion of religion, but I couldn't help but think something else was involved. But what terrible thing could have happened that not only changed Andy, but forced him to forget it ever happened?

"If you hurt that old man... I'm going to hurt you!" I shouted. Andy finally stopped walking. That got his attention. He briskly walked back toward me, still not making eye contact, and stopped inches away from my face, knife still in hand. His face contorted in a truly monstrous way. Andy was reaching critical mass.

"You're gonna hurt *me*?" he shouted. Now he was inches away from my face. "Your best friend?"

There was a lump in my throat the size of a pineapple.

"...yes." I was holding back a flinch.

Andy took a small step back and laughed. "So let me get this straight: you're willing to ruin this friendship, let's face it, with the *only* friend you have, just so you could stand up for some old *roidie* you don't even know? What are you suddenly the *roidie* messiah now?"

"Stop using that word, Andy. Do you even hear yourself?"

"What's wrong with saying *roidie*? Huh?"

"It's offensive, just stop! You're being an asshole for no reason. Let's just go to the park and play tennis like we planned. You owe me a rematch anyway."

"I think I'm fine right here, Robbie." Andy said grinning, with a strange, bright twinkle in his eye. He looked like a mad man. "Hey, I just thought of something very, *very* interesting. Robbie. *Roidie*. It sounds a hell of a lot similar. And with you being so sensitive about all these androids, well... how do I know that you aren't a—"

“Don’t say it, Andy. I already know what you’re thinking.” I felt my cheeks flush red with anger.

“How do I know you aren’t a *roidie*... Robbie?” The grip of the knife in Andy’s hand tightened.

I couldn’t hold back my rage any longer. I didn’t care that he still had that knife in his hand. “Are you *fucking* kidding me? How many times have you stayed over for dinner? Slept over my house? How many times have we helped each other out in a fight or played video games until our eyes were practically bleeding, huh? Andy, we’ve been friends for the last five years, that’s gotta count for something.”

Andy stopped to think about that for a second, but only for a second, the briefest of seconds. Thinking hadn’t been a strength of his as of late.

“Yeah, yeah. I guess all of that stuff is true, but you never proved to me that you weren’t an...” He paused. “... an *android* ,” he added with a vicious snarl.

“What happened to you on that vacation, man?”

“Would you stop talking about that damn vacation?” Andy shouted. “I never went on any freakin’ vacation. You’re trying to reprogram me, man. It’s exactly what a piece of filthy android garbage would do. Those abominations are trying to bring down society and all you ever wanna do is protect them. You care about them more than you do about me!”

“I’m *not* an android. And I care about you more than you’ll ever be able to understand.”

“Prove it.” The bright sun gleamed off of his knife as he brought it up to eye level. “Cut the wire.”

Andy held out the knife with a psychotic look in his eyes. I considered taking it out of his hands, but it felt like a trap. The old man with the long, white hair sat there, still uploading, still blissfully unaware of the danger surrounding him. I, meanwhile, feared for my own life. My best friend was going to kill me if I didn’t do exactly what he wanted. He was going to stab me in order to prove to himself that I wasn’t an android. My best friend... my *only* friend.

“Why are you doing this, Andy?” I pleaded as tears welled up in my eyes. “This isn’t you. This is *inhuman*. Think about Ms. Bender!”

Andy seemed taken aback, and for a moment, I felt like I had genuinely gotten through to him. There was a light in his eyes I hadn’t seen even a second ago. His arm suddenly went limp and he loosened the grip on the knife in his hand. I could’ve sworn his eyes started to fill with tears too. But just as quickly as he had become pacified, he snapped back into a violent rage.

“She... she got what she *deserved*. What all androids deserve. What *you* deserve!” Andy screamed as he lunged towards me with his knife ready to stab.

I quickly turned and jumped on my bike, mentally willing my legs of jelly to pedal as fast as they could. I heard the sound of Andy’s bike chain rattle as he leapt onto his bike and started chasing me down. I had just enough of a head start to make it to the crest of the steep hill before he caught up to me. But Andy was stronger than me, faster than me. I couldn’t see how I was getting out of this alive. I turned my head around for a quick look at Andy and saw that his signature smile had become a gruesome grin. With his knife in hand, he was rapidly gaining on me, shouting, “where are you going, Robbie? I just wanna see if you bleed!”

“Jesus Christ, Andy!” I shouted back with what little oxygen I had left in my lungs, “You know me. You know I’m a human. You don’t have to do this!”

“But *you’re* the one who doesn’t understand, Robbie. I *do*. I need to make sure! And you know there’s no chance of you getting away. I’m better than you, faster than you. Just stop and make this easier for the both of us!”

I started to lose my grip on the handlebars of my bike as the sweat on my palms poured out in a flood. I couldn’t do it anymore. I wanted to cry. I wanted to live. But most of all, I just wanted my *friend* back.

I switched to high gear and pedaled hard down the steep hill, trees blurring past me. I quickly realized the only option left was to cross the eight-lane AutoWay and somehow lose

Andy in the park. If I had even the slightest chance of getting away from him and from the insanity of the day, I had to do it. As the cars zoomed by, I knew I couldn't stop for anything. My life literally depended on it. I could almost feel Andy's breath on the back of my neck. Terrified, I let my momentum carry me across as car after car flashed by in a multicolor blur. It was only when I heard a loud, metallic crash, like someone dropped a refrigerator off of the side of a skyscraper, that I opened my eyes and found myself at the entrance to the park, unscathed. But where was *Andy*?

Disoriented, I tried to collect my thoughts. Andy's turquoise bike, front tire severely damaged... circuits and wires strewn out along the road... black smog filling the air around me... it's hard to breathe. On top of that, a cloud of debris blew into my eyes, blurring my vision. Off in the distance, I could hear a jingle-jangle of metal slowly approaching me. *Cl-clank. Cl-clank. Cl-clank.* It was the only sound I could hear at the moment despite the blare of car horns and angry drivers. I rubbed my eyes to try and get a clearer view, but everything still looked blurry. My mind raced as I scanned the horizon. I could barely make out what looked to be a strange ball rolling towards me. I approached the "ball," trying to get a closer look, but as my vision began to improve, I started to make out something that looked like... a human head? "No, that would be insane," I thought. "Why would it be making that noise if it was someone's head? I must be hallucinating from all of this adrenaline in my brain."

The ball-like object rolled closer and closer, clanking, until it hit my feet. "If this is a ball," I thought, "it's the strangest ball I've ever seen. It's dark, misshapen, and covered in... is that hair?" I reluctantly picked up the "ball" and turned it over. It was unusually heavy and had a strange coldness as I brushed my hand over it. There was also a strong smell, almost like burning plastic, that emanated from it. As my vision returned to normal, I immediately wished it hadn't. As I looked down in horror, all I could see was Andy's huge grin staring right back up at me. I immediately dropped it... *him*... and heard muffled words coming from the ground.

“Wh-what?” I said, sick to my stomach, barely able to stand. The world became a wild vortex swirling around me as I heard my own voice echoed back.

“Screw you, man! That was a really steep hill.”

THE END.