

The Social Circuit

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It's almost thirteen o'clock in the morning and you can't sleep. Your watch pings. "Your vital signs suggest you need to be receiving an additional four hours of sleep." If it was so concerned with your health it would get some shut eye itself.

You use your Array and start checking your Bop. Bop is boring. No one even goes on Bop anymore, *so why do you incessantly check yours?* Plus, Holograms feel kind of buzzy at unholy hours in the morning. There's too much static and the letters are electric. Your snore-inducing frienemie's Bop is literally shocking you.

"You should go on BotBop," you remember Adan Prown telling you in chemo-algebra yesterday. BotBop is just some stupid Bop knockoff that some sweaty programmer had to write to keep the Cyborgs and Androids from rioting. And most of the Cyborgs in your school just go on Bop, now, so it's just... what... a place for robots--you correct yourself-- *Androids*. "Robot" isn't politically correct anymore, unless you're talking about a toaster or your annoying watch. *And what do Androids even talk about?*

Cyborgs are humans with robotic modifications. Androids are robotic life designed to look like and mimic humanity. You may be a human, and you're not exactly a sympathizer, but you try to keep the terms straight when you talk to one.

You're fighting insomnia and anything Androids talk about has got to be more interesting than Enily Backer posting three thousand flickers of her cloned puppy wearing funny hats.

You don't have to create an account to browse profiles. Robots (Blanket slur for Androids and Cyborgs) apparently don't need privacy. [Does "robot" refer to both Androids and Cyborgs?] *Who to stalk... er... investigate?* First you look up Adan Prown. Sure enough, the human's got a BotBop.

Not a Bot. Hate to Bop. Love Electra Reese and support the Bot cause.

For the past few months whenever an opportunity presents itself Adan Prown will start babbling about how he's a "Cyborg Lover" or in an "inter-technological relationship" and everyone will dutifully roll their eyes.

Electra Reese is a Cyborg in your Aqua-French class. Every few weeks she goes for a facial upgrade, and her hair is permanently bound in perfect corkscrews. It'll probably stay that way until she decides to get different follicles attached.

Electra Reese

Cheerleader. Bot Homecoming Princess 3013. 3 months with Adan Prown.

Boring, you think. Cyborgs are just people in robotic shells. Unless they're talking about weird upgrades and robotic armor upkeep all they know is human stuff. And sure people think it's weird that Adan Prown is dating a Cyborg, because Cyborgs look... kind of cold and too perfect. But it's no longer a social taboo for a human and a Cyborg to be in a relationship. Everyone's just confused as to why Electra Reese would want to spend more than three *seconds* with a geek like engineering whiz kid Adan Prown.

You bite your lip and twiddle your fingers against the holographic keyboard. You look up Talos Prown.

I'm just a robot.

The Prown family took in Talos when he was assembled. It was a meticulous assembling. He was designed using all synthetic materials, microchips, and all of the red and green wires any robot- *Android* could require. He's cloaked in replicated tissue and covered in a smooth layer of artificially grafted, artfully freckled skin. His organs were made out of a flexible plastic-hybrid compound and his brain is an expanding hard drive. His bones were crafted from industrial strength steel and capped with platinum. And you knew all of this, of course, due to purely scientific inquiry. Also, his capsule-chair hovers across the table from you in art and you sometimes can't think of anything else to say, even though firing questions at him feels rude. He just answers you mechanically while he sketches away at his landscape piece.

You feel exhausted. You switch off Array and squeeze your eyes shut. You dream up lines of binary--anything to keep your overactive mind from coming up with stupid questions to ask Talos in art. What self-respecting human wants to befriend a... *robot*? You don't want to be a social pariah and lose all of your friends. At the very least you would be taken about as seriously as Adan Prown.

When you board the yellow Hoverbus in the morning you're suddenly more aware of the installation-bot at the wheel. Someone penned "TOM" across the robot's metal forehead. He doesn't have a Botbop. He doesn't even have a real name. He doesn't have any advanced emotional programming and his hands are melded to the steering wheel of your school bus. He powers off in a parking lot while you duel insomnia in your bedroom [?]. And for the first time just looking at it- *him* is painful. It makes your stomach churn. Was some kid right to give the piece of scrap metal a name he would never know? Should you even care?

"Welcome aboard!" Tom greets. You force a smile he won't register. You don't pity your coffee maker, so you shouldn't pity Tom.

You watch the city blur past the window: impossibly high, glossy chrome skyscrapers capped with clouds, flashing advertisements in Smart Concrete on sidewalks, and iridescent blue lights glowing softly through the thick smog that has become a second skin for your hometown. And everywhere there are robots.

In Art you ask Talos how his digestive system works. Immediately you fumble for your paint stylus. *What kind of creep even asks something like that?*

“How personal are your questions going to get?” he teases.

“What’s that smell?” asks a kid in a mesh hoody and velveteen Sagger Shorts.

“Smells like rust and motor oil. *Who could it be?*” His friend jabs, staring pointedly across the room at Talos.

“It kind of works the way change machines used to sort out quarters... but on a molecular level, with a more advanced chemical filtration system,” he tells you, apparently undeterred by the teasing. If it wasn’t common knowledge, no one could have guessed he was anything less than Adan Prown’s taller, leaner bookend. He doesn’t need prescription glasses, and he wears his freckles better than his brother. He acts normal enough. He has bad habits: he chews on the end of his stylus and grinds his teeth when he’s bored.

Talos Prown gets a pass to stay after class to work on the eel canvas piece he’s been sanctioned to enter in the *Android* Art Show. You’re halfway to Aqua-French when you realize you left your snorkel under your Capsule-Chair.

The meticulously replicated Nova York skyline is set up in the middle of the empty classroom. Talos doesn’t dip his stylus into the dollops of paint on his glass pallet. He pours fistfuls from the containers into his hands. He throws a blue meteor at the Statue of Innovation. The paint splatters across her torch, it skates across the Triplet Towers like rain, and it speckles

the floor of Mr. Arano's classroom. You don't say anything- how do you placate a rob- an Android?

At thirteen o'clock the next night you go on BotBop and you make an account. You're feeling like a huge jerk for not telling off those boys in art. A guy in something as hideously disgusting as velveteen Saggars shouldn't be talking about anyone else.

Say something about yourself.

The screen prompts. What is there to say? You do nothing. You are a classic non-participator. You feel sorry for people and you watch them suffer and you compartmentalize and move on. You have a hundred fake friends and you nearly fell asleep one time in Aqua French. You are the textbook "normal human": cool and calculating until you short-circuit and burn a fuse.

Human enough, but still just a robot.

In thirty minutes you get two hundred "bops". *Who even goes on BotBop at this hour?* You make a mental note to ask Talos if Androids need to sleep while they recharge. You decide to sit with Electra, Adan, and Talos during lunch tomorrow.

Before you close your eyes, you realize Adan Prown must have gotten to all of your fake friends. They were circling this washed-up social media site like vultures. Yours was the first interesting thing they'd ever said to each other.

At lunch Adan introduces you as his friend from Chemo-Algebra. Talos rolls his eyes.

"We sit at the same art table," he deadpans.

"We have Aqua French together. Don't get even bigger heads, boys," Electra chides.

Suddenly you're in with real friends.

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Electra Reese stops wearing synthesized skin. She becomes a perfect metal skeleton in sundresses and scarves. She and Adan write across their foreheads with permanent markers.

“Just a robot.”

Your slogan- Talos’s slogan- gets bopped by billions. But Electra Reese can’t be Prom Queen and Talos Prown can’t place in the Unaltered Human Art Show. She’s altered- she’s cheating- and Talos isn’t even technically *alive*. If you can build a personality out of lines of code and grow tissue from a handful of atoms--you weren’t creating life. But you were assembling the pieces. How human do you have to be, to be alive? At what point does a spark of electricity become a spark of living existence? You feel dead when you look at Tom every morning.

It starts small... people Bopping you back saying things like “I feel like a robot listening to Chemo-Algebra lectures.”, “If Talos Prown is a robot then what is Mr. Tesla? He *has* to have a microchip for a heart.”, “It’s the 22nd century. Why are we still fighting for Androids and Cyborgs to have rights? Who’s even opposing this right now? Our parents? My cockapoo voted in the last election! Is it too early to move for Electra Reese for President?”, “Is Electra seriously too fake to win Prom Queen? Cynthia Coyl wears enough makeup she could have naturally blue skin and I would never know.”

How does it feel it start a movement?

You’re doodling and don’t realize that Talos is talking to you. He started a conversation for a change.

“I didn’t start a movement,” you say. He doesn’t write on his face or peel back his skin and neither do you.

Electra Reese is fighting for the right to be Prom Queen, to be herself, and to date the school’s most promising engineer, because even that’s not allowed anymore. Now robots are dangerous- even half-robots. Adan Prown isn’t even allowed to escort her to the newly-

sanctioned Android-Cyborg Prom. Meanwhile, Talos Prown is fighting to be human. What are you that he isn't? No one fights for Tom. Tom doesn't complain- he's probably happy being blissfully ignorant.

"What are you fighting for?" Talos asks, his tone one of scientific inquiry. *What does the other half gain?* He seems to wonder.

You aren't fighting. You were a catalyst and then... nothing. You'd always thought it was better to watch and worry. You'd always thought if it isn't your place to speak then you shouldn't even pantomime your opinions. In your silence you've been fighting for the right to be a robot.

Maybe with a little more work, you could finally feel human.