

MOONDANCE

by Brian Plante

JERRY NOONAN NOTICED the damage to his robot immediately at the start of the shift. In his RC rig at home in New Jersey, he raised and lowered his arm, but on the Moon the corresponding manipulator flopped about uselessly. It also hurt like hell, and he had to turn down the feedback circuit until the arm felt nearly dead. Some sort of accident had left its metal skin deformed, and the servo motors were responding erratically. The bastard on the previous shift had messed him up good.

The job of raising and joining the huge cables that would support the dome over the Huygens crater was grueling work, and Jerry was damn well not going to work an entire shift with a bum manipulator arm. He radioed the problem in to his unit chief and was given permission to take his robot over to the repair shop. Better to spend a few hours in the shop getting a new arm than struggling with the thing for a whole shift. Damage among the robots was not uncommon in a job like the doming of Huygens crater, and Jerry had been to the repair shop a few times before, but this time he met Audrey.

"Aww, did the big burly cable-hauler hurt his poor little paw?" a feminine voice from the inverted funnelshaped repair robot spoke into his earpiece.

Swell, Jerry thought. A lady robot mechanic.

"It was like this when my shift started," he said.

The repair meth circled once around Jerry's barrelshaped body, looking over the damage before cradling his broken manipulator in its own metal arms. Jerry could not tell how many legs this meth had under the round bumper "skirt" of its body, but he noticed how the meth wiggled from side to side as it moved, a most unusual gait for a robot. It was an incongruously feminine walk.

"Wow, you really did a number on this arm," the meth said.

"I said I didn't do it," he responded. Even though she handled his manipulator gently; Jerry pulled away sharply, as if he were hurt. With the transmission lag, his robot did not mirror the move for another second and a quarter, but all the lunar robot operators were used to dealing with the time delay. "The operator before me left it like this. If I could work around it, I'd leave it like it is, so the bastard would have to deal with it on his own shift."

The mech moved forward to scoop up the broken manipulator again, this time a bit more forcefully, making Jerry wince with pain back home in his RC unit.

"Hey, I just fix them," the meth said. "Nothing personal, okay, buddy?"

"Jerry. My name is Jerry Noonan."

"Pleased to meet you, Jerry Noonan. I'm Audrey."

"Audrey. You know, we don't get too many female operators up here on the Moon."

Audrey chuckled and said, "and at these prices you won't get too many more."

"Huh?" Jerry mumbled.

"You know, the old bar joke about the talking kangaroo."

A joke? I'm sorry, I don't get out too much anymore. Not to bars, anyway."

"Too bad. Bars can sometimes be . . . useful," Audrey said as she attached a wire harness into the test socket of his damaged arm. She walked her robot over to a console on the other side of the room, again bouncing and swaying in her unusual fashion.

"You walk funny for a robot," Jerry said.

"Funny?"

"Not funny ha-ha. Just different for a robot. It's kind of a girlish walk."

"Hmmm. Being a woman, I suppose I can live with that. You better turn down the sensitivity on that arm now, or this might hurt a bit."

Jerry just barely felt a jolt of power surge through the manipulator before he turned off the feedback. Without him controlling it, the arm began flailing up and down under the mechanic's overriding commands.

"That didn't come out right," Jerry said. "I like the way you walk. It's very feminine, if a pointy, metal cylinder can be feminine. Do you move like that on purpose, or is it just the way you walk naturally?"

"Hmmm. I've never thought about it too much, so I suppose it's natural. Probably something carried over from my dancing."

"You're a dancer?"

"Not a ballet dancer or anything like that," Audrey said, bouncing back over to Jerry's side. "Just some social dancing on the weekends. Jerry, this arm is shot. I'll just replace the whole thing, okay?"

"Yeah, whatever it needs. Do young people still go out dancing much these days? It's been so long since I've been out, but I used to go dancing before--"

Jerry was about to say "Before I was married," but just then she popped off the fault, manipulator, and he fell silent as he gaped into the empty socket where his arm had been.

Audrey shimmied over to an equipment locker and unpacked a replacement manipulator. "All kinds of people go out dancing," she said from across the room. "Not just young people. It's a very human thing to do."

"I don't know," Jerry said. "I guess it was fun when I was the right age for it, but you get older and settle down."

"I certainly hope not," Audrey answered. "It's when you stop doing young things that you start getting old."

"Hmm. Maybe you're right, but I just don't feel like going out much anymore."

"Come on. You don't sound so old to me."

"How old do you think I am?"

"You sound too young to be sitting at home. What are you, thirty-five? Forty?"

Back home in his RC rig, Jerry smiled. He was fifty-three and feeling ten years older. In his younger days, he had not been unattractive, but he had developed a paunch from so many years of inactivity; and the few hairs on his head that hadn't fallen out yet were decidedly gray.

"Yeah," he lied. "Forty. What are you, late twenties or so?"

"You know you're never supposed to ask a lady that question."

"Yeah, I suppose. Sorry."

"But if it's any help, the manufacturing sticker on my chassis says I was made in 2038."

"Very funny."

"So why aren't you laughing? Lighten up, McGraw."

Jerry fell silent as Audrey quickly installed the new arm and tested it with her instruments. Perhaps he was being an old stick in the mud, but this was, after all, the workplace. Jerry goosed up the feedback a bit while she still cradled the new arm, and he imagined a flesh-and-blood person holding his arm, instead of the cold titanium and carbon fibers.

"Where are you working from, Audrey?" he asked.

Audrey lifted his arm carefully, checking her instrument readings, then gently lowered it to his side. "Me?" she said. "New Jersey."

"You're from Jersey? Me, too. What part?"

"Woodbridge."

"Woodbridge! I'm over in Edison. That's only a few miles away. How's that for a coincidence?"

"Well, the Huygens project recruited pretty heavily in central Jersey, so there's bound to be lots of us from the area here."

"Audrey, we're practically neighbors. Well, then, where is this place you go dancing? Maybe I know it."

"Mostly at the Candy Bar on Route Nine. It's across from the Pharmatex building."

"Yeah, I know it. I used to go there once in a while when I was a lot younger.

I wonder if the place is still the same as I remember."

"There's one way to find out. Why don't you come around and check it out for yourself?"

"Well, maybe I will," Jerry said, although he couldn't realistically see himself entering a dance club at his age.

"Good. Perhaps I'll see you there, then," Audrey said.

"Umm . . . what nights do you go there, and how would I recognize you?"

"Oh, I'm there a lot. Fridays and Saturdays, mostly. If you come, I'll find you. I promise."

Jerry wanted to stay and talk a bit more, but the new arm was checked out and ready to go. His crew would be looking for him before too long.

"Audrey?"

"Yes?"

"Could you just walk around the room one more time for me? I think it's really cute how you make that robot move."

"Hmmm. Okay. How's this?"

Audrey, sashayed with an exaggerated bump and grind to the middle of the room, her arms held out slightly on either side. She finished with a pirouette and then curtsied.

"Just beautiful. I can't wait to tell the guys about this -- a robot with a sexy, walk. Audrey, you're priceless."

"See you around, tall, dark, and shiny."

THE WEEKS went by at work, and one by one the big cables were hoisted into place along the crater's rim as the big spiderweb took shape. Each new workday was just like the last, and Jerry liked it that way. He had mentioned to his wife Dana that he had heard the Candy Bar was still a popular spot, but she just shrugged and said that dance clubs like that were for young people. Jerry grimly agreed and quietly went back to his rut.

One day a cable with a bad splice in it let go explosively as weight was being applied. The free end whipped around and brushed a couple of Jerry's robot legs, snapping them off like matchsticks. He still had four mechanical walker legs remaining, and while he was not stable enough for work duties, Jerry was able to limp the robot over to the repair shop. The robot mechanic wiggled over in a familiar gait to greet him.

"Hey, robot 60148. Is that you in there, Jerry?"

"It's me, Audrey. Couple of missing legs this time."

"So I see. Well, that'll surely put a crimp in your dance step."

Jerry looked away guiltily. "Were you looking for me at the Candy Bar?"

Audrey went to the locker and retrieved a couple of leg units. Her robot glided back to Jerry smoothly, without the usual bouncing around, and she began installing the new legs.

"I was disappointed that you didn't show up at the club," she said, "but it's okay. I have lots of dance partners."

"I really did mean to come out there, but I just couldn't convince myself."

"So you chickened out. Happens to the best of them, I'm afraid."

"Audrey, if an older guy like me showed up at the Candy Bar. wouldn't people stare?"

"Maybe if you were a really bad dancer they would, but forty's not so old."

Audrey popped the two new legs into the empty sockets and began testing them.

"I, um, wasn't quite honest about that," Jerry said. "Actually, I'm closer to fifty."

"It still wouldn't matter. It's how young you feel that counts. You come to the club, and you'll be surprised."

"Are there many older people at the Candy Bar?"

"A few. Nobody thinks they're strange, and they seem to have a good time. Why are you fighting with yourself over this? Just come on out and see for yourself. Stop being so ... old."

"I'm a little rusty, no pun intended. If I came to the club, would you dance with me?"

"Oh, Jerry, it's not a contest or anything. I'll dance with you right now if you'd like. Come on, your legs are all fixed."

"Here?"

"Number 60148, may I have this dance?"

"Um, how about some music?"

"Music? Sheesh. Hold on a sec."

Audrey's manipulators slumped, and the robot sank an inch or two onto its skirt. Jerry figured that Audrey must have slipped out of her rig back in New Jersey and her robot was unmanned. A few seconds later the mech came back to life, and music began playing in Jerry's headset.

"Audrey, what did you do?"

"I just patched my home audio rig into the headset and found a disc to set the mood. Sorry I can't seem to light any candles up here, though."

The music was a Billy Joel classic that was already an oldie back in Jerry's courting days. Dana and he had danced to this one for the last time at their wedding reception.

"Take my hands, silly," Audrey said, snapping him back to Huygens.

Jerry clumsily reached over and lightly took two of Audrey's manipulators in his. His sensors felt the cold alloy and polycarbonate resins, but he perceived a warmth, perhaps a false triggering of his robot's feedback circuits, as he put an arm around the top of Audrey's metal torso.

They moved together clumsily at first. With the transmission lag, the robots

were both a step behind the music, but Audrey bounced lightly to the beat and Jerry struggled not to crash into her. After a minute, he realized that they were moving well together, dancing around the repair shop, touching but not knocking into one another. She was skilled at following his shaky lead, anticipating his moves even with the time lag, and pulled him closer as they spun around the room.

"I'm not much of a dancer, am I?" Jerry said.

"These robots just aren't made for it, but you're doing fine," she whispered in his earpiece.

In a few short minutes, the music ended and the two of them stood there, looking at one another.

"This is too weird," Jerry said, breaking the mood. "I have to get back to my crew."

"See you at the Candy Bar this weekend?" she asked.

"Maybe. If I come, you'll really dance with me, right?"

"If my dance card's not all filled up."

Jerry wondered if that was really a joke. Perhaps she already had a steady partner. And if she was as attractive as her voice sounded, the young men were probably swarming all over her. It wasn't like he was seeking romance, since he loved his wife, but he was curious to see if he could still attract a pretty young thing even if just for a dance. When she got a good look at him she might not be so interested.

"Well, thanks for the dance, but I have to get back now," he said.

As he walked toward the door, he heard her mutter, "Men!"

FRIDAY NIGHT after his shift, Jerry was feeling restless.

"What are you doing now?" Dana asked, after he had stood before his open closet door for a full five minutes.

"Just looking. Thinking."

"About clothes? Are you feeling all right?"

"I was thinking that if I wanted to go out to a place like the Candy Bar would I have anything even remotely appropriate to wear? Most of these old things are hopelessly out of fashion now, and I probably couldn't fit into a lot of them anyway."

"Oh, no, you're not going to start in on that again, are you?" Dana said. "This is just one of those silly midlife crises where you're trying to recapture your youth, you know."

Jerry stuck his tongue out at her. "I asked if people our age ever go to the Candy Bar, and I heard that it was okay."

"You weren't expecting me to come along, were you?"

"No. Not really."

"Well. what were you thinking? You weren't planning on going out by yourself, were you?"

"Um. yes. That is, if you won't come along with me."

Dana just stared at Jerry silently, looking hurt. Then she pursed her lips, and Jerry knew she was gauging his sincerity. He hardened his face into a mask of resolve to let her know he was serious.

"Okay," Dana said, "why don't you wear something relatively simple? Khaki slacks, a dress shirt. You can probably still get into the navy blazer if you don't button the front."

Jerry's jaw dropped. "You're letting me go? By myself?"

"Hell, no. This may be one of the stupidest things you've done in a long time, Jerry Noonan, but if you're determined to make a fool of yourself, I'm coming along to keep an eye on you."

Dana walked over to the other closet, opened it, and began making plans of her own.

JERRY ORDERED an autocab, which took them up the highway, past places that should have been familiar but weren't any longer. They just hadn't had a need to go into Woodbridge in the past twenty-five years, and much had changed. On the short ride, Jerry and Dana reminisced and pointed out to each other where long-gone places had been. The cab left the highway and slid up in front of the Candy Bar, which still looked vaguely familiar except for the gaudy new 3-D laser billboard in front. Jerry began to have second thoughts. He punched some commands into the autocab's console, paying extra to keep the cab on standby at the destination, just in case they wanted to make a hasty exit.

"Hey, look!" Jerry said, pointing. "They still have the old fountain out front."

The decorative fountain was a small, round pool over which flew several nude cherubs supported by water jets. The water was tinted a garish shade of blue, and colored lights made the gushing water look even more unnatural.

"Bad taste never seems to fall out of fashion," Dana said.

"Lighten up ... McGraw," Jerry said. "It's still pretty much as I remember it, although I don't recall either of us thinking it was so ugly years ago."

"What did we know back then? We were just kids."

"We had fun, though, didn't we?" Jerry asked.

Dana smiled at him. "Come on, let's get this over with."

Jerry opened the door, and the two of them entered the Candy Bar. The interior was dark and crowded, and the sound system was pumping out the loud, fast "ozone" music that was currently in fashion. On the dance floor, Jerry, saw a hundred young people of both sexes moving about in various strange dance styles. He got the idea that most of the people were dancing independently of partners,

but as he continued watching, he noticed certain points in the music when the whole group seemed to move together in a few well-rehearsed steps.

"Seen enough?" Dana yelled in his ear to make herself heard over the din of the music.

"Just give it a chance!"

Jerry led her around the dance floor to a quieter spot, where they grabbed a free table. They ordered two glasses of wine from a waitress, and Jerry paid the outrageous price without comment.

"Jerry, this is not our crowd," Dana said. "And who can dance to this ... noise?"

Jerry scanned the room carefully. It really wasn't their crowd, all right.

The

dancers were mostly in their twenties, with maybe a few as old as their late thirties. Nobody on the dance floor was within ten years of them, he figured. At the far end of the bar, away, from the dance floor, several booths held a few older people, couples and singles in their sixties perhaps. In another corner, overlooking the dance floor, a deejay booth was manned by a pimple-faced

kid who couldn't have been any older than eighteen.

"Can we finish our drinks and just go home?" Dana asked. "I'm not very comfortable here."

"Let me see if I can find someone to say hello to."

"Who?"

"Someone from work. The one who told me about this place."

"What does he look like?"

Jerry almost corrected Dana's "he" to a "she," but thought better of it.

"I don't know. We've only talked robot to robot."

"Then how will you recognize him?"

"I'll just know. A very distinctive way of walking."

"Well, go find him so we can get out of here."

"I'll see if I can spot him." Jerry looked over the group on the dance floor. Audrey had to be one of the better dancers, if she was here. While he sipped his wine, he watched them move sinuously about the floor. One woman in a green jumpsuit was particularly skilled, but it wasn't Audrey's rhythm. Several other women were also good at that style of dancing, but Jerry ruled out each one of them. There was nothing of Audrey that he recognized. It was hopeless, he finally decided.

"Do you want to try a dance?" Jerry said, to Dana before he gulped the last of his wine.

"I don't think I can handle this music," she answered.

Jerry told Dana to sit tight. He went over to the deejay booth and talked to the pimple-faced kid.. He returned smiling.

"The next song is ours," he told Dana

"Oh, no, you didn't pay that boy anything, did you?"

"Just a little," he said, chuckling. "What's a few dollars once ever, twenty years or so?"

After a few minutes, the ozone song faded out and was replaced by a familiar melody: Billy Joel singing "Just the Way You Are." Dana's face lit up with recognition.

"Hey I remember this one!" she said.

"Care to dance to it?"

"All right, why not? " she said, rising from her seat.

Most of the young people were streaming off the dance floor, sitting out the slow music, which left Jerry and Dana plenty of room. The remaining dancers, unfamiliar with the old song but unwilling to give up the floor, continued dancing the ozone steps, determined to wait out the strange music.

Jerry took Dana's hand and began to dance. Fearing that he'd steer into a collision with the gyrating dancers, he kept them moving about a small patch of the floor, away from the others. Jerry was careful not to step on Dana's toes, and they quickly fell into the rhythm. The young dancers gave them plenty of room, and several of them stopped moving long enough to watch the two of them dance in the old style.

"I'm beginning to feel really self-conscious," Dana said. "People are looking at us."

"Let 'em look," Jerry said, giddy with the wine and the moment. "Let's show them how civilized adults dance."

Dana and Jerry looked into each other's eyes, their feet moved, and the rest of the dancers in the room faded away.

The song was over too soon, and the pumping ozone beat took up again, but Jerry and Dana continued dancing at their own pace for a few seconds longer, ignoring the different tempo.

"Pretty good for an old-timer," Dana said.

"You're not too shabby yourself," Jerry responded.

The floor rapidly filled up with young people returning for the loud music. Jerry looked around the room as the crowd surrounded them. In the distance, he saw one of the older ladies in the shadows get up from her booth and begin making her way to the dance floor. Despite her obvious years, she walked with the gait of a much younger person, almost bouncing with each step. The young people all around her greeted her with obvious affection, slowing her progress.

Still dancing, Jerry watched the older woman cross the room. Was she looking his way? Yes, she was. The woman stopped at the edge of the dance floor, looked him straight in the eye, and lightly began clapping her frail hands. A few of the young people standing around her also looked at Jerry and Dana admiringly and began adding to the applause. The woman broke eye contact with

Jerry and cast her gaze on Dana, the corners of her mouth curling up in a barely detectable smile. Jerry steered Dana around so that she was facing away from the woman and began to raise his hand to wave, but just then a man stepped out from behind her and she looked back toward him. He appeared to be in his late sixties, slightly stooped and with a poorly fitting jacket, but he moved spryly. When he spoke to the old woman, her slight smile broadened, and the pair of them stepped on the floor and began dancing. Not old-fashioned dancing, but the same slippery moves the young crowd was performing.

The applause got louder.

"Are those people clapping for us?" Dana said, noticing the group of young people at the edge of the floor. "Now I'm really feeling self-conscious."

"Nah, it's for the old couple," Jerry said, pointing.

"The old couple? I thought we were the old couple."

Dana looked over to where Jerry was pointing and saw the older couple for the first time.

"Oh," she said.

Dana and Jerry worked their way off the floor and watched the two older dancers mix it up with the young crowd, obviously enjoying themselves.

"Had enough now?" Dana asked.

"Yeah, I suppose," he said. "Let's go home, Dana."

A WEEK LATER, on the Moon, Jerry saw the plummeting tool kit in plenty of time to move his robot out of the way, but he stayed where he was, letting the falling metal box take out one of his purposely outstretched manipulator arms.

"Noonan, whassa matter with you?" the unit chief growled in his earpiece.

"I guess I wasn't paying attention," he responded.

"Get yourself over to the repair shop and get it fixed. Now!"

Jerry's robot didn't just walk across the crater -- it danced.

"So, it's number 60148 again, is it?" Audrey said when he shuffled into the shop. Jerry?"

"Yeah, it's me," Jerry said.

Audrey worked over the arm perfunctorily, quickly popping a new one in its place.

"You know," Jerry said, "I went to that club of yours last week and I was wondering if I might have seen you. You weren't ... the lady in the green jumpsuit, were you?"

"Sorry, no. I, um, didn't make it out to the club last week. Something came up."

"Well, I had a pretty good time anyway"

"See, I told you so. Like I said, you're only as young as you feel. Who did you dance with?"

"Just somebody. Some pretty young thing I met at the bar."

"Hmmm. Any interest there?"

"Yeah, I think so. She's a great little dancer and I think we might make a good couple. Don't know if I'll be back at the Candy Bar though. Too noisy."

"Too bad for me," Audrey said, sighing. "But I hope it works out for you. I guess I won't get that dance you promised me now, huh?"

"We could dance here, if you'd like."

"Sure. Hold on while I put on some music."

Audrey's robot went dead for a minute, then came back online. As a saxophone played the introduction to the old familiar tune, the big steel barrel and the inverted titanium funnel came together and moved around the room in time.

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