

Byron Clarke spent his weekend in the usual way - lots of reading and some exercise while listening to classical music. This time, he thought constantly about the problem Mr. Sweet had given him as homework.

On Saturday, just after finishing lunch and washing up, he took out the sheet of paper on which Ralph had written: "Write an algorithm to run on an indefinite number of parallel processors that can test whether or not a given sequence of code in the same computer language will operate on the same configuration of processors."

As Mr. Sweet had explained to him at the time, the task was to test if a program would be valid - without actually running the program.

Thinking about it made Byron's head hurt, and for good reason. It was a trick question. The assignment was impossible, and had long ago been proven to be so. The whole point of it was to get Byron to find that out for himself.

For now, he hadn't, so he started to build himself a decision procedure algorithm. He tapped away at the keyboard for hours, sipping hot chocolate throughout, trying to make something work. Early on, he realised that he would have to teach the computer exactly how it operated. In essence, it would have to know exactly how it did everything it did and everything it could ever do.

That was where the impossibility lay. The computer would literally have to define itself from outside its own self to do that.

Perhaps Mr. Sweet was being a bit cruel in having Byron chase his tail like that, but the lesson he would eventually become intimate with was absolutely vital to know if he wanted to be a pro.

The more Byron worked, the more frustrated he became. The more he thought about it, the more distant a solution seemed. But he kept at it. He didn't know it at the time, but because he was doing all of the work for a system with parallel processors, he was learning on his own and free of charge many things that were outside the scope of Ralph's classes.

It was late Saturday night, when lots of people were out having fun, that Byron finally gave up. He didn't realise yet that it was impossible, let alone why, but he knew it was nothing he could accomplish. He was also smart enough to know that he had taught himself some very important things, so he came out of the experience feeling pretty good about himself.

Of course, once the obsession with the assignment was out of his head, his other new obsession came back with full force. That night as he went to sleep, he thought about Heather. He thought about her beautiful face, her hair, her sexy curvy body. He thought about her walk, her smile, her soft feminine voice.

While he longed for her, the artificial woman was standing only a few miles away - upright and naked in a cylindrical glass booth. She had had a long day of undergoing diagnostic tests and scans of her own to make sure her new hardware configuration was operating at peak efficiency. With some help in the form of minor programming and equipment adjustments from her friendly technician Maria, she had been processed as any other Robot Control girl would have been, and sent to her storage booth ready for action on Monday.

When that morning came, it brought lots of snow with it. Big flakes floated down from the grey sky while Byron drove and Heather rode into the downtown core. A message on Mr. Clarke's

voicemail informed him that the old scanner would not be coming back. Much to his surprise, a brand new combination scanner/copier/printer would be arriving early that morning.

He was pleased, and not in the least because he could give poor Heather's knees a rest and have her doing her old, boring, unrewarding job again.

When she showed up, he could hardly hide how glad he was to see her. She still hadn't been programmed to flirt, and didn't even know what made him so happy when she walked through the door. Nevertheless, she matched his enthusiasm. He saw her response and again mistook upgraded software for romantic interest.

As Agnes scowled off in the distance, Byron led Heather into his office to let her hear the message on his phone. An android like her was more than capable of understanding what the recorded voice was saying, and her CPU sent instructions to her facemask and her body to match his level of excitement.

Byron knew that the replacement scanner was nothing to get this happy about. He thought they were getting closer to each other. He thought he really had a chance to woo his attractive young employee.

She was just trying to fit in and look like something she wasn't.

Agnes walked in on the pair then. "Byron," she said, unamused, "package for you."

"Oh, that must be it," he said. He immediately made himself look managerial and stepped out of the office to sign for the new scanner. After bidding the courier good day, he brought the heavy box downstairs and unpacked it.

Agnes and Heather walked behind him so they could see how to use it. He set the box down on a large oak table and proceeded to unpack the device. After he had gotten all of the cardboard and plastic out of the way, he moved it to the rusted old cart and plugged it in to the extension cord.

Agnes grabbed the instruction manual and began to look through it while Byron flicked the power switch on the back. Nothing happened. He went to make sure the extension cord was plugged in. It was. He knew there was power down there because the green-shaded lamp on the table had turned on. He plugged the lamp into the same cord. It lit up.

Byron took a deep breath and said "Oh, fudge." Agnes and Heather looked at each other while their boss plugged the scanner back in and tried the switch again. Nothing.

"Aw, this is just great," he said. "Class dismissed until further notice," he said to the two women.

"You probably should have let it sit for an hour before plugging it in," Agnes said.

"What good would that have done?" asked Byron.

"That's what I've always done," she said.

"We'll have to get a replacement for the replacement," he said. "Heather, sorry, but it's back to listing the audio reels."

"Okay," she said.

The fembot looked completely unfazed as she picked up her clipboard and began working from where she had left off on Friday.

Byron and Agnes walked back up the old staircase.

"I should just bring mine in from home." he said, only half jokingly. He stopped partway up the stairs and called back down, "Heather, can you pack that expensive paperweight back up please?"

With her old programming, Heather wouldn't have known what he was talking about. But now she could deduce with great accuracy that he was referring to the scanner.

"Okay." she said in her soft feminine voice.