

## A Bad Robot

Bonnie had to admit it: EARL was a bad robot. No longer could she ignore his many flaws. He played embarrassing music. He couldn't do cool robot things like cutting steel with his laser eyes. At night his parts made so much noise that Bonnie could hardly sleep. Sometimes she got really mad and put him in the closet, but that didn't help.

Bonnie had spent months building her robot. She called it Electronic Armed Robotic Laserdeath, or "EARL" for short. She chose the name last year when her mother seemed cool with having a laser-eyed robot in the house. Bonnie later found out her mother was joking. That was the first problem.

Bonnie had done all the work on EARL herself. She built a system to keep EARL stable. She used a bag filled with air in the machine's belly to help it stay up. She made the hands out of steel. Bonnie used a cutting tool of her mom's to make EARL's face. The face had slanting eyes and a mouth full of pointy metal teeth. With this face, EARL looked terrifying and awesome.

For 10 months, building EARL took up all of Bonnie's free time. Her friends at school made a website called *WheresBonnie.com*. On the site they put up pictures of Bonnie's face on top of people climbing mountains in India or shopping in Japan.

*Ok, seriously I don't remember the last time I saw you after school, wrote Nicole, one of Bonnie's closest friends, in an email. Maybe this "robot" is actually that new boy Jack? Call me, nerdbreath.*

So yesterday Bonnie brought EARL to school. She knew he wasn't quite ready. His software programs had a few problems, and sometimes his right leg got stuck. But she was tired of her friends teasing her, and she was tired of getting weird looks from kids she didn't know.

Man, EARL made one sweet entrance. The robot reflected sunlight like a mirror as he walked up the stairs to the school beside Bonnie. Everyone was silent as the two of them walked by. No one heard the buzzing from the motors in EARL's arms and legs over the noise of the school buses.

Bonnie didn't feel good for long, though. Once inside the school, EARL saw that the metal lockers looked like his own robot face. EARL let go of Bonnie's hand to look at the lockers. He pushed students out of the way as he went.

"EARL. Cancel Instruction!" Bonnie said.

EARL heard nothing over the students screaming and running in fear. At last the robot found a beat-up locker door. Of all the locker doors, this bent one looked the most like EARL.

The robot grabbed it in both hands and pulled it off the locker.

Bonnie was horrified. He's destroying the school! He's going to get me kicked out! "EARL! CANCEL INSTRUCTION!!" she screamed.

EARL stopped in place. The robot's head spun toward Bonnie as he held the locker door closer to his steel chest.

"Looks like your stupid robot found a friend," said Brian. Brian was a student who always teased Bonnie about her braces.

"Shut up, weasel," Bonnie shot back. But she was shaking. EARL's arms were strong enough to crush bowling balls. But how could its machine brain, torn right from her dad's old computer, possibly malfunction like this? It wasn't supposed to be having these problems.

"EARL. Drop." Bonnie said. The robot walked to her side, but it did not drop the locker door. Bonnie sighed. Reprogramming the robot and making its arms weaker would take weeks of work. There was no time for that now.

“We’re late for class,” said Bonnie. She was surprised to hear herself say “we.” EARL is a tool, Bonnie’s mother had often told her. He is not a friend or a puppy.

“Remember it isn’t a human being, honey,” Bonnie’s mom said one night after she found Bonnie dancing around her bedroom with EARL. “It’s a walking blender. Never forget that.”

Right, Bonnie thought, standing in the school hallway. Walking blender. With a shaky hand, she took EARL by the elbow. Then she guided him—it!—into her classroom.

“Why hello, Bonnie!” said Mrs. Grube, Bonnie’s teacher. From her calm face, it didn’t seem the teacher had heard the noise down the hall. “I see you’ve brought your experiment. What is that he’s carrying?”

Soft giggles came from other students in the classroom. “Um, it’s a programming error,” Bonnie said. “I can fix it.”

“Hmm,” Mrs. Grube said. She paused for a few seconds, and everyone felt uncomfortable. Mrs. Grube pulled her eyebrows together as she tried to think of what to do next.

“Well,” said the teacher, cheering up, “We’ve all heard a lot about your robot. Why don’t you tell us about him?”

Bonnie breathed out. “Great!” she said. “EARL. Begin Demonstration Program 1.”

The robot turned and faced the class. The students’ backs became stiff. Only now did they see how tall the robot really was. Demonstration Program 1 called for EARL to press “Play” on the iPod in his chest using a finger on his right hand. The song “Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger” by Daft Punk would flow from speakers in his hips. As the song played, EARL would dance, making karate-chops with his hands.

Too bad there was a locker door in EARL's right hand! He refused to let go of it.

So the robot switched automatically to Demonstration Program 2. EARL tapped the iPod with a finger on his left hand. Bonnie watched in horror as her robot danced to Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On." She had forgotten all about Demonstration Program 2. It was written months ago, back when she didn't think EARL could handle karate-chop dance moves.

Tears filled Bonnie's eyes. She didn't even *like* Celine Dion anymore! "EARL! Cancel Instruction!" Bonnie shouted.

The robot heard nothing over the words of the song. "Near, far, where-EVER you are!" The music sounded like a terrible screech coming out of EARL's thigh speakers. "I believe that the heart does go on!"

Mrs. Grube's eyes were as wide open as her mouth. Bonnie's classmates didn't know whether to laugh or run for cover.

I cannot stand one more second of this, Bonnie thought. As EARL turned left in his dance, she moved in behind him. Reaching into the robot's lower back, she pulled out the power lines from EARL's battery pack. The big machine sank to the ground. As it did, its body pushed air out of the inflated bag inside, making a noise like a balloon losing air.

The class went crazy. That weasel Brian and his four stupid friends laughed so hard they fell off their seats and rolled across the floor. Bonnie felt like she might explode. She ran out of the classroom with tears pouring from her eyes.

That night Bonnie got her first good night's sleep in weeks. She was worn out from all the crying. Plus her dad moved his car from the garage and put EARL in there instead, so finally Bonnie couldn't hear the robot making noise. When she finally woke up, she walked out to the garage and found EARL. He lay in the far

corner. One of his arms was on her mother's drill. The other arm was still holding the school locker door.

Bonnie smiled. The robot had found some friends. Now it was time for Bonnie to find her friends. She took her phone from the pocket of her shorts. Then she called Nicole.

"Hey dorknugget," Bonnie said. "What are you doing later?"