

2nd Place, Fiction

Yes, You Can

by Patrick Cahill

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"Sorry for being so pushy last night," David commented as they prepared to test the device.

Dr. Hanna Kyle was backing herself up into a strange device atop a massive conveyor belt, doing checks of her own. "You didn't miss anything exciting, don't worry."

Satisfied with her work, she rolled forward with a satisfied smile. "Alright! Time to get this puppy rolling. David, I need you to monitor the conveyor, and shut it down at the mechanism if you see a problem. And, you know, if I scream like a baby and ask you to."

David couldn't stop his bark of laughter, despite his best attempt to stifle it. Hanna laughed too, and rolled further down the conveyor. "Hand me that bag?"

He trotted over to retrieve the bag. She smiled as she leaned down to take it. David was glad she turned and rolled away before she saw he was blushing.

Why, oh why, did I have to get a massive high-school crush on my boss? Batting a thousand on this one, David.

He went over and sat down near the conveyor at the other side of the room, just resting his legs as he watched the machine kick on from Hanna's commands up at her device.

"So this kinda works backwards, doesn't it? You're using your prototype to run the conveyor so any wheelchair works, and then the next step is turning it all into the chair itself?" he asked loudly to get through the machines surrounding his boss.

"That's right!" Hanna called back.

She was taking medical stickers out of the bag, and putting them on several key points of the back of her neck. "I'm sure there will be programming issues with the transition, but this is the proof of concept prototype. If I can use my own nerve impulses to control a conveyor belt, obviously I could extend that to the wheels of a motorized chair."

David cringed a bit at the device. "So this thing is wired into your brain?"

Hanna giggled. "Not directly, David. It uses nerve pulses through the spinal column. Basically, it watches the messages being sent to your body's limbs, and copies them as they go, translating them into control messages to the machinery. At the moment, that's the conveyor."

She took special straps from either side of her device, and bound them to the armrests of her chair. Once she knew they were secure, she undid her brakes.

David checked the belt once more. "Good to go?"

"Yep, yep. Take a load off, just be ready."

Hanna became serious as she started attaching little wires to the medical stickers on her neck. Once they were all in place, she took a breath, closing her eyes. *If this works, frying my own spine will be worth it. Just focus, Hanna.* After a little nod to herself, she reached over to the console on her right and started to flip switches.

“We’re live,” she called out to warn David.

“Roger that,” he called back.

Settling her arms onto the armrests, her eyes tightened. It was clear she was concentrating, cringing faintly every so often. Her head and hands shifted a little as she tried various methods. David was becoming sympathetically sad as he watched the conveyor stay completely still. Hanna’s brow creased, and her hands gripped the armrests. *It’s like walking, Hanna. Remember those muscles. It’ll be even easier now. Don’t have to worry about moving legs. Focus!*

The conveyor banged and twitched, rotating forward faintly. Hanna smiled, and David gave a holler, snapping his arms up.

“Trying for better, stay clear,” Hanna called out to him, but she was clearly happy.

“You got it!”

Concentrating again, she managed another twitch. Technically it would have moved her backwards, but she wanted motion of any kind. Refining it to specifics would be the next step. In her mind, she imagined lifting her legs forward together.

It reminded her of the dancing she used to do. The freedom of movement, the feeling, the joy of it. She could still imagine how it felt to do a spin and snap-pose...

The conveyor roared to life at full speed, ripping along.

David snapped up, suddenly worried, and Hanna stared down at the belt as soon as she realized what had happened.

The conveyor immediately stopped.

“You okay?” David called, not sure if he should be excited or panicked.

Hanna was stuck for a moment, but finally replied, “Y-yeah, I’m good. That was... sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’d say it works!” he laughed as he declared.

She grinned. His excitement was touching, and she realized she deeply appreciated someone else being so emotionally invested in her work. “I’d say it does! Now let’s see if I can replicate that.”

She tried the dancing memory again, that deep, muscle resonance of flowing through the motions with the music. The conveyor kicked again, but it was weaker this time. The sensation-memory had been weaker as well, too conscious, too constructed.

“...Okay, I think I’m getting it,” she muttered to herself, and closed her eyes. *The system needs overcompensation. It won’t react to the little pulses, it needs something loud and clear. Let’s try this...*

She focused, imagining herself on a running track, braced to haul ass as fast as she could. She let the imagined scene really absorb her. She could almost smell the Astroturf and burning rubber of a hot day's track. With a grunt, she shot forward, sprinting with all her might.

She actually lurched forward with her body in the chair, but it worked. The conveyor whirred to life, ripping along at full speed. Hanna opened her eyes, and tried to hold the nerve commands she was using.

The conveyor kept revving along, until she finally had to relax, panting from holding her breath.

David hurried around, looking up toward her in the device. "You okay?"

Hanna nodded. "Yeah... just... had to use a trick to make myself send the right signals. Left me... breathless..."

She reached up, turning her device off. "Do me a favor... and hard-lock the conveyor. Not in the mood to go crashing into the wall because I didn't turn this off right somehow."

David ran over and put the machine in a mechanical lock. He also unplugged the power to be safe. "Locked down and power disconnected."

She unplugged the stickers, unstrapped her armrests, and wheeled forward, her breath steadying out. David walked around, and smiled up at her. "Good job, Doc."

She grinned. "Back at you, David. I've got some data to review now. Why don't you go treat yourself to a drink? I think some on-the-clock R&R is well deserved."

David smirked, hands on his hips. "Oh no. After a success like that? You're coming with me, young lady."

Hanna blinked. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. Your data will keep. Your proof of concept just worked! My God, woman, you need to celebrate!" he finished emphatically.

She wasn't entirely certain why she was starting to blush as she tried to laugh it off. "David, I'm a workaholic scientist. I don't 'go out drinking'. My idea of fun IS compiling and studying data," she explained with a smirk as she regained her composure.

He clasped his hands toward her and did a very exaggerated begging pose. "Come ooon, Hanna. You're killin' me here! Party time! Celebration! Laughing and being happy it worked!"

She had to laugh, leaning down on her useless legs, her hair hanging down around her face. "That's cute, David, but honestly, I don't even drink. Stuff tastes awful to me. I'd just drag you down."

"...Not even a little?" he asked meekly.

She shook her head, still amused.

"So what do you do for fun, to take a break?"

Hanna shrugged. "Not a whole lot recently, David. I mean it. I'll be fine. Just go have some fun!"

David leaned so he was on the conveyer with his chin and elbows, hands clasped under his head. "Hanna."

She raised an eyebrow. "David."

"You're killin' me."

Hanna leaned down, and patted his cheek. "I do it with love."

And then they both laughed, David sinking his face into the machine at her wheels.

She rolled further off, hit her brakes, and started to slide herself down onto the conveyor so she could drop her chair down to wait for her.

"How about before you got so work focused? What did you do to take a break?"

"Oh for goodness sake," she began, both playful and sincerely exasperated as she lifted her chair down onto the ground. "Why are you being so insistent? I'm letting you off early WITH pay to go get rowdy with your friends, and you're complaining!" Her tone was mixed between humor and annoyance.

Acting as though he was annoyed and looking off, he was actually just making sure he didn't stare at her as she lowered herself down into her chair. "I think you've realized I worry about you staying all cooped up out here, especially after such a big mark of progress. You're gonna burn out without some kind of little, stupid reward, you know?"

She unlocked her brakes and rolled over to her desk, her eyes rolling skyward. "The reward is that it worked at all. You know what? Fine! I went out dancing!"

"There we go! See? Was that so hard?"

Hanna stuck her tongue out at him sidelong.

As if the issue were over, David started to put away some tools. It wasn't long before he said, "I was thinking that you probably don't need a mechanic around here full-time anymore. On-call, no doubt, but with everything working again, you'd probably be more comfortable flying solo. At least that's my thought process, you know?"

She glanced at him. "I wouldn't drop you like that, David. I'd give you notice before any kind of job termination."

He stood from his bag, smiling at her. This time his smile was gentle. "I know you would, boss, but it's no problem. See, the thing is, I didn't take this job for the money, Dr. Kyle."

Her eyes tightened.

"I respect your work, you, and how hard you work. I wanted to help someone like that." He shrugged, glanced down, and rubbed the back of his head. "I was thinking, if you just need someone to help out, that I could volunteer instead. And that way, I could ask you something else."

"What else would you be asking?"

"Well, if I wasn't your employee anymore, I'd ask you out on a date."

She stared at him as her face turned red. "W-what, what—what?"

David was blushing himself. “Well, I already respected you before I got here, and you didn’t let me down a bit. Then—I won’t try to deny it—I noticed how absolutely beautiful you are, Doc. I’d probably regret it the rest of my life if I didn’t at least ask. But, I meant it. I respect you. That means your answer sticks. I just... would appreciate it if you gave it some thought before shooting me down,” he finished meekly.

Hanna kept staring at him, still blushing, completely caught. She had thoughts screaming in every possible direction. Part of her was charmed and flattered, part of her was annoyed, another noticed she’d always thought he was quite handsome, and yet another reminded her that it could be a giant mistake, or he was hiding something awful from her. “I-I don’t know... David... that’s... sudden.”

He nodded. “Understood. Will you think about it?”

Hanna only managed a little nod.

David’s gentle smile returned. “Thank you, Hanna. Now, what was that about dancing?”

She laughed a bit, shaking her head as she faced her computer again. “Oh, please. It’s been a long time.”

He set a hand on his hip. “Oh come on.”

Her brow creased. “...It’s not that easy.”

“Hanna, the entire point of what you’re doing is to remind people who feel trapped that they’re not actually trapped. If you want to dance, learn how to dance!”

“I KNEW how to dance!” Hanna suddenly roared at him, her arms twisting her wheels. It startled both of them, and she blinked, eyes wide.

“S-sorry...”

David eased into a serious, but kind expression. “That’s just it, Hanna. You remember dancing. The only problem is that the way you danced doesn’t work anymore. That doesn’t mean you can’t dance. It means you need to learn how to dance again. I’ve seen you control that chair, Doc. You can make it sing.”

Hanna was getting frustrated faster than she could calm down. “Oh, come on! Have you ever watched wheel-chair dancing, David? It’s stupid! I danced because of how it felt! I screwed up in the lab, fried my own spinal chord, now I can’t feel anything below my waist! Yeah, I could learn how to ‘dance’, but it wouldn’t be what I wanted!”

“Now how do you really know THAT for sure?” David challenged, but his voice was calm and even.

“I know how much I can feel now, thank you very much!” she shouted back angrily, and then rammed her wheels to twist back to the desk. “Just go, David!”

His shoulders sank. “Hanna, you know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Just go!”

He sighed, picked up his bag, and walked out. He closed the doors softly as he left. Making his way to his truck, he muttered, “Blew that completely...”

Hanna, however, was crying into her hands.

The atmosphere in the lab was a bit chilled the next week. Dr. Kyle said nothing about the awkward conversation, but also continued to work with David politely. He wasn't sure if it made him feel better or worse, but his attempt to apologize about what he felt was a poor choice of words was met with a simple, "Don't mention it."

As days of repeated tests continued, he did notice that Hanna seemed a bit more exhausted than usual each day. And he thought her left arm had an odd bruise on it toward the end of the week, but he didn't feel right asking about her private business after he'd failed so miserably with his confession.

Hanna wheeled herself forward from the Augmenter near the end of the workday on Friday of that week, and looked down to her companion. "David, can we talk for a minute?"

He cringed as he faced away from her that moment. *I'm so fired*. He cleared his throat, and came over to her. "Of course, boss."

She turned herself to face him properly, not lowering herself off the conveyer yet. "I've been catty all week, and I apologize. I appreciate your apology from before, but I couldn't give you an honest reply. I overreacted in a bad way. I'm flattered by your high opinion of me. You're also right, I shouldn't just give up on something I like because of the accident."

David eased into a gentle smile. "I don't think you overreacted at all, ma'am. I'm happy to hear that, though, I'll admit."

Hanna tipped her head, and then started to ease herself down. David stepped back to give her room.

"You forced me to make a decision, actually," she began, setting the chair down, and starting to slide down into it.

"Oh?"

"I looked up dancing lessons for the physically handicapped. There was a studio in town offering them, so I signed up." She extended her forearm with the bruise he'd noticed, "Proof of my battle with the chair. I think the floor stepped in and won the fight, though."

David had to constrain his laugh at her self-deprecating joke. "I'm proud of you, Doc. Good for you."

"This brings me to the real point," she began afresh, settling fully into her chair, turning it to face him.

He raised his eyebrows.

"You're right, we can't date while you work for me. That's just inappropriate. However, if you're okay with me firing your nosy behind, I'll deign to let you buy me dinner tomorrow evening," she finished with a smirk.

David's face lit up, and he nodded. "I think I can survive being fired for a shot like that, ma'am."

Making a show of it, she reached back and pulled a folder out of the back of her chair, presenting it with a dynamic flurry of her arms. "Your nullification of contract, sir."

He smirked right back at her, and snatched it out of her hands. He pulled his own pen out of his pocket and signed it without a moment's pause, then returned the folder with an overdone bow. "Since I'm no longer your employee, I'll stop using ma'am... Hanna."

She smiled more naturally as she took the folder back. "I'm driving, by the way. What time should I pick you up?"

He seemed surprised for a moment, then adapted quickly. "7-ish sound good to you?"

"Sounds good!" she answered with an almost childish bravado. Her cheeks were a bit flushed. She was proud of herself for staying brave throughout the incredibly awkward topic, and part of her was quite excited about going out on a date. The rest of her was terrified.

David smiled, and then started to collect his things. "You really are beautiful by the way."

Her blush flared full and true, and she tipped her head down bashfully. "David..."

He grinned. "Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," she affirmed with a nod.

"Take care of yourself. And don't stand me up!" he finished with a laugh.

Hanna snort-cackled because of how the joke caught her, and she blushed worse, finally just waving him off as he laughed from the sound she made.

After the sound of the door closing after his departure, she let herself grin, still blushing.

David, wearing a dark-green dress shirt and black slacks, anxiously stood on the sidewalk in front of his house. A phonecall had settled the particulars of address and dress style for the location Hanna had chosen. Now it was 6:53 PM and he was as nervous as a highschooler waiting to ask someone to prom. It did strike him how absurd it was to be so nervous after actually getting a 'yes'.

A silver van pulled around the corner to his left, and he immediately recognized Hanna's face. She smiled on eye-contact, and gently pulled the van to a stop in front of him. She leaned across to actually open the door for him as well. "Hey there, handsome. Going my way?"

David laughed with her, and slipped into the chair. His eyes danced down the sparkling red dress she was wearing. "I certainly hope so. And pardon my choice of words, but: damn girl."

Hanna laughed, but she did blush as well. "Now then! Ready, dear sir?"

"Absolutely."

Arriving at the club, David made a show of opening the door for her, but made no attempt to help her beyond it, and Hanna smiled as she gently rolled down onto the cement, offering her hand.

It was natural how he did it, but for some reason, when David actually leaned down and kissed her fingers, Hanna was struck by it. She'd had fantasies like that moment when she was a little girl, and she hadn't really understood until that very moment that she'd given up on the hopes of experiencing it after her accident.

The music was loud in the club, but lively. It was a restaurant as much as a dance club, with tables around the edges of a broad brightly-lit dance-floor.

Hanna felt an awful clench in her stomach when she noticed she was literally the only handicapped person the building. She swallowed tight, and forced a smile up at David as he looked to her from telling the hostess they needed a table for two.

David saw the anxiety in her eyes, however. Still smiling, he leaned down to her ear. "You look fantastic, and I'm honored to be here with you, Hanna. Just breathe. This will be a lot of fun."

Again, he was so close she felt a blush on her cheeks, but she also felt a little thrill. His flattering words didn't hurt, of course. The scent of his cologne was nicely subtle, too. Hanna hid the fact that she actually sniffed softly by smiling for him again, and nodding. "Breathing, right. Don't want to forget that."

David smirked. "You know what I meant, Doctor."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

Once they were led to a table, Hanna muttered, "Thanks," tugging some hair behind one ear.

It struck David how absolutely gorgeous she looked in that moment, and so his response was a little softer than he intended. "No problem."

They ordered drinks and *hors d'oeuvres* quickly, leaving the pair of shy and anxious people to stare at each other. There was a feeling of adventure, of gentle risk. Hanna forced herself to breathe calmly, managing a smile still. "Now the awkward phase, right?"

David laughed, nodding. "I suppose so. I'm feeling a bit brave, however. Hanna, may we dance?"

She was caught like a deer in headlights again. "N-now? With... all these people..." she trailed off because she knew how stupid it was to be concerned about so many people *in a club*.

David stood and came around to her, offering his hand. "You've been practicing all week, Hanna. Come on. For yourself."

She relaxed enough at last, her shoulders easing down as she reached for his hand. With a little smirk, she showed off a little, using one wheel to spin around wide, and moved toward the dance floor with him. David grinned.

Their fingers laced together for a heartbeat, and their eyes locked because of it.

On the floor at last, melding through the already dancing crowd, Hanna's fear resurged, and she cringed a bit. "I might... I mean, with so many people so close..."

David leaned down, whispering at her ear to have it reach over the loud music. "Just dance, Hanna. Forget them."

She smiled, closing her eyes for a moment. Taking the risk, eyes closed, she whirled around with a surprisingly fast spin, her hair cascading because of it.

David was shocked, happily so, and glided into dancing beside her, spinning around to match her style as much as her rhythm.

The brave leap let Hanna relax into a smile, looking up at David as she playfully rolled her wheels back one at a time with the beat. He glided back with her, both laughing as he practically moonwalked.

"Take my hands," Hanna said loudly enough to be heard.

David instantly reached for her outstretched hands, and followed her faint twist-gesture to lead her into a full spin under his hands, back into a paired spin as they let go and faced each other.

Grinning, Hanna actually popped a wheelie with her back to him, and twisted down into a spin closer to his legs. David twisted his arms around himself, grinning right back, and let her roll around him, a hand trailing his waist. He hoped his blush was hidden by how flushed from dancing he already was.

The delighted pair kept flowing with the music, turning, spinning, stepping, rolling. Neither of them noticed that part of the dance floor had cleared for them, and several tables were staring their way in admiration. Hanna was beautiful as her dress sparkled and her body whirled. David suited her with his gliding gestures and handsome clothes.

As the song built to a crescendo, David smiled with some mischief, and flowed out in a wide pose, one hand extended to his talented date. Hanna accepted his hand, and felt him pull her into a swift spin, so she followed his lead happily.

She gave a little yelp of surprise as she felt her chair tip back, the music flaring, but she realized just as fast that David had caught her. He was tipping her back into his arm in the hilariously cliché pose, one of his feet right up against her closest wheel to make sure it didn't roll out from under either of them.

It also left the pair breathing powerfully, practically embracing, in abrupt silence as the song finished.

"Told you, you could dance," he whispered with an amazing fire in his eyes and a wonderful smile.

"I'd forgotten," she whispered back, her heart racing for several reasons beyond just dancing.

He was kissing her the next moment, and Hanna didn't feel bothered in the least. Her eyes fell shut, and she reached up to hold his neck as their lips caressed.

They gently parted, their eyes opening to share the wonderful glow they were both feeling.

When applause broke out around them, they were both caught and blushing violently. David made sure he properly settled Hanna back on the flat floor before they both looked out and around, clearly embarrassed, but also astonished by the almost the entire club cheering and clapping for them both.

Lost, but realizing she had to do something, Hanna just started tipping her head to thank different sides of the room. David finally put on his playful smile, and did overly showy bows. He finally stopped and gestured toward Hanna for the crowd. The cheers grew louder, people grinning and laughing at the good of it.

Hanna playfully swatted David, calming everyone to happy laughter, and the pair moved off the dance floor. They had to shake a few hands on the way to their table, but finally enough moved on to have the club back to normal chatter and dancing after a few minutes.

At their table, the pair looked at each other, and then burst out laughing.

“Told you!” David reiterated, arms up.

Hanna stuck her tongue out at him. “You’re lucky you’re a good kisser.”

Humorously mischievous again, he leaned onto his hands. “Oh? Does that mean I get to make a repeat performance of that kiss sometime?”

Hanna smirked right back. “Maybe. If you’re good.”

They shared a light laugh again.

Calming herself a bit, Hanna met his eyes, saying, “And David?”

He perked up, listening.

“Thank you. For the push.”

“Entirely welcome. And you were magnificent out there. Just so you hear it clearly from me.”

Hanna glanced down with a bashful smile. “You weren’t too bad yourself.”

“There’s one thing I always want you to remember,” David replied, serious and sincere.

Gentler, she asked, “What?”

“One phrase: ‘Yes, you can.’ Promise you’ll remember that, hm?”

Hanna smiled, and offered her hand across the table. He gently gripped her fingers.

“I think I can do that.”

*The majority of this story came to me in one shot, but a particular scene required (I felt) some real-world corroboration. Dancing with a wheelchair flowed naturally for the story, but I wanted to confirm it **could** be done already, and not just in a sci-fi manner. This led to some research, and delightful discovery of not only dancing, but competitions of professional caliber. It only went to further prove the core concept of this little story: Yes, you can do that.*