

## Tinker's Beau – A Short Story

Far inside a building located at the heart of the Aalto University Innopolis, the hallway was completely dark despite the fact that it was barely afternoon on a hot July afternoon. Security-coded doors with biometric identification close it off from the rest of the floor. Inside, there are four tiny offices and two dark work spaces.

There are no windows. The air ducts are miniscule, and muffle out all sound from inside, as do the sound proof walls. The computers inside are not connected to the internet, and have an OS specially designed by some of the people who work in those offices.

Currently, only one of said people is in, and she is enjoying a relaxing game of Tetris. She has programmed it herself, on one of the computers, in true USSR-spirit.

The woman is Malena and she's the reigning department champion of the game, and currently very close to clearing the whole level when the security system gives a beep. Startled, she drops the L-shaped piece wrong. Grinding her teeth in frustration, she closes the game just as one of her doctoral student colleagues enters.

It's June, a foreign student with an annoying, thin face and big eyes, worn square glasses and very small ears. She's also the only other girl at the lab, and the person that it so happens showed Malena how to program Tetris onto the computers.

"Did you have a nice holiday?" Malena shouts out as the girl passes her open office door.

"It wasn't a holiday. I went back to my home town for a funeral."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that... Hey, listen, I thought you were going to stay on holiday four weeks... I didn't finish those reports just yet."

"It doesn't really matter. I'm on the brink of a breakthrough."

"I'm sure you are, I'm sure you are... I'm going to order some thai for lunch, you up to split some pad?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm allergic to most spices used—"

"Oh that's right. Kiss the doll hello from me."

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"What to do with you, Isaac, what to do..."

There's no real point in speaking to the sleeping doll, she knows this, but it's sometimes hard to remember. His stormy eyes stare off into oblivion. He is propped up against a wall, wires running to and from his scalp, hair tousled. The power cord is plugged in, right at the base of his skull. Apart from that, he is perfect. His hands are smooth and soft, but have a bone structure just like that of real humans. His figure is slender and

proportional, and he is, to the eye, almost indistinguishable from the sculpted corpse of a short, young man. His mouth, slightly ajar, reveals a set of pearly white teeth and a very realistic tongue, top of the line.

June puts on the light in the office and dumps her bag on a chair. Cracking her knuckles she turns on the computer, next to a big poster of Aiko. She brushes away some crumbled candy wrappers from the spring, and the cylon speakers greet her welcome in a cool, female voice with a Japanese accent.

"Thank you", she says softly, and turns to the doll, sighing.

She turns on his recharger, sending a slight flutter through his eyelids. A little while later his chest starts to heave under the white lab coat.

She's on the brink of a breakthrough, she can sense it. The androids so far have been good at one thing each; there were the ones that did sports, there were the ones that talked nicely, there were the ones who were motorized sex toys, there were the ones that did calculations or played games, but what there was not, was something that would fool a five-year-old.

The download is complete, and Isaac is waking up. June can tell by the small twitching in his fingers and the synthesized breath speeding up.

"Good morning, June Remi," he says in the crisp voice he has been given, sounding a bit tired, and opening his eyes fully, revealing their deep blue to the world. He was programmed to blink once every four seconds, just because speaking to someone that does not is considered alienating.

"I hope you had a nice time on your leave of absence."

The last three words come out wrong, hollow, synthetic. Synthesized.

"Thank you for your concern! It was as one would expect."

"I hope your family is well."

"They are coping."

He smiles like a toothpaste commercial cover boy, and looks like a young man just woken up from a rather pleasant daydream. While charming, it's not the correct emotional response, and June sighs.

"Do you want to learn something new today, Isaac?"

"I would love to!"

The exclamation is new. June's head jerks up from her clipboard.

"Love, Isaac?"

"Do you want the lexicon definition?"

"No, I just..."

He puts his head askew. It's a strange gesture he uses sometimes, almost as if to display pity.

"Well, Isaac, I'd like to teach you the skill of wine-pairing today. What I have here is a bottle of white wine.

This brand of wine is called Aya, it's a dry wine that goes together well with spicy food. It was sent by one of our investors, it's from his California vineyard."

"What does spicy food taste like?"

"It is... spicy," June replies before she can think of a better way to explain.

"What does spicy feel like?"

She searches for words for a few moments, and then lights up.

"Spicy feels like something warm on your hand, and then something acid before it fades."

"I... see."

"Would you like to be able to taste, Isaac?"

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It takes quite a bit of work to prepare a sense of taste. The olfactory technologies are experimental at best, but June decides to build a taste of smell as well when she's at it, since it is basically the same structure required except for that it would be activated by doing a sniffing motion with the nose and filter air instead of liquids.

It does not come cheap. She asks for additional funding from the Japanese and US investors, and has to order the parts needed from labs in South Korea.

The Dean of the university, June's superior, looks worried on the Tuesday morning that June visits his impeccable office. She takes a seat in the peach leather armchair across from the man.

"We want to see some results by the Robot Exhibition. Tokyo needs to be convinced that we are doing... something. Your research has not been fruitless, but understand this. We need those results, and your resources have been limitless this far. The Isaac-project is growing," he catches the next word with his hand, "Outdated. Our competitors in the US are launching models that can work in hospital environments, factory workers, warehouses, kindergartens... And you are giving the Isaac-project a simulated sense of taste?"

"Yes."

"By the end of the year, I expect a product, or I am withdrawing this project from you."

"Yes, sir."

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June works very hard, and at the end of August, Isaac has his first taste experience.

"I have something here for you to taste", she says one afternoon and picks a vial of clear liquid from her backpack pocket. The doll stands up and approaches her with a smile.

"I can't be sure how strong the taste will be for you, Isaac. Here you go."

The doll takes the vial into his hands with an excited smile. The liquid will go into a small container that will be drained at the same time as her excess oils.

June forgets to analyze what parts of his basic or advanced behaviour patterns activate as he instantly removes the plug, lifts the little vial and gives a brave smile:

“Cheers,” he exclaims, then he tilts the vial back.

His eyes widen, and he swallows.

“What did it taste like?”

“I do not... know.”

“Oh wait, it’s because I didn’t activate the chemical recognition’s path to your... wait just a little bit...”

“No. Tell me, what did I just taste?”

“You’ll know when I activate this. It won’t take a minute.”

“But if I know it, I will not have learnt.”

She blinked, and opened her mouth as if to say something, but then shut it again. She clears her throat.

“I gave you lemon soda syrup. It’s... put in carbonated water. Look, I have the bottle somewhere.”

The doll nods.

“What would you, June Remi, like to talk about.”

“I... I have an article upon the financial prospects of...”

He tilts his head again, blinks, slower than usual, then shakes his head. This was very unusual, if not unprecedented. His beautiful eyes rested on hers.

“What would you, June Remi, like to talk about,” he repeats.

“I told you, I have an article upon the...”

She pauses, and twists the hands in her lap.

“What do you know about Asimov, Isaac?”

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One day in September Milena arrives early for work and hears a somewhat unexpected sound from the office next door. It sounds like laughter. She guesses that the Remi girl is trying out some new algorithms, and decides to surprise her with a honking horn she picked up from Bizmagic on her weekend trip to Tallinn. She slams the door open and is greeted by a very strange scenario. The robot and the woman both lay on the floor. She with a book in her left hand and, it, he, wearing nothing but the lab coat and a pair of ladies’ panties, next to her and, literally, rolling on the floor laughing, with the woman’s right hand in the vicinity of his waist.

“What the hell is going on here, June?”

“She is reading to me. Tickle me again, Junebug!”

The doll rolled over and hugged the girl tightly. She seemed about as shocked, judging from the blush on her cheeks, but considerably less appalled, than Milena.

"Junebug?! What the actual hell, you know what this looks like! I don't care what you are doing to that robot, but as a part of your lab I advise you not to go down that path."

"Milena, I was only reading Asimov to him when he begged me to tickle his feet."

"Asimov? Asimov! What about your big breakthrough?"

"I'm very close to it."

Milena left the office without another word.

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"What is love, June Remi?"

"You know what it is, Isaac. Check your lexicon. And you sound very naïve asking it, like a lost android child in a bad manga."

"I'm sorry. Can you taste love?"

"No, it's hard to explain. I'm really sorry, but I'm working very hard on a report. Here, I brought you some books and...", the woman reaches for a paper bag in her bag, "...some artist equipment. You asked me what it is like to create yesterday, remember. I have a guide book here, but you don't have to follow it."

The doll looks at her, and accepts the pencil and the paper. It's the kind of cheap pad you get from the supermarket, wrapped in clingfilm, with a dancing cat on the cover, but the robot holds it reverently. She carefully turns the page, revealing a surface of smooth, cream-coloured paper. He follows her motion and just as carefully strokes the paper, and then holds up the pencil in front of him.

"Oh, I forgot to get it sharpened – let me show you", June says and takes his hand into hers.

"This is a pencil sharpener. Put the pencil's end in there – no, that is the eraser-"

"What is an eraser's purpose?"

"Well, you use it to erase lines that you do not want. Then you twist the pencil until the lead looks sharp enough to draw with."

"Can I taste it?"

The doll quickly puts the pencil in his mouth before she can answer. His expression goes dark.

"I'm sorry, Isaac, but you can only taste things in liquid form."

"It is not your fault. How do I use the pencil?"

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At the beginning of October a sudden beep announces a visitor at the gates just as June is introducing the concept of human rights to Isaac. Two stern-looking men identify themselves as the Dean's right hand and a researcher that June had read about, but loathed. They made it clear that they were extremely busy.

"We wish you to show us your work. We are here to evaluate your 'progress'", states the Dean's right hand.

"I am very sorry, but I cannot show you my work without a direct order from..."

"Here. Quickly, now."

June takes the paper, and yes, it states very neatly that the men are who they claim, signed by the Dean. She shows them to the biometric test. They walk in silence to her workspace.

"How much do you know about my research?"

"We read the August report."

"August? Well, there *has* been progress, for sure. Isaac can now determine when a person is telling a joke, and he recognizes-

"Yes, yes", interrupts the taller of the two strangers, "there is nothing radical about your findings. The robot, if you please."

"He... might be a tad suspicious about you. He hasn't met a lot of strangers in his... life."

"We see."

Isaac is doing shadow shapes against the wall in the light of a projector. He's wearing a green sweater he knitted - rather poorly, she'll be the first to admit - himself, and a pair of hand-me-down jeans from June.

"Hey there Isaac," June greets him.

"Good afternoon," he says, and flutters his fingers. The shadow bird soars across the wall.

"Where is the robot?" asks the shorter stranger. His bald head gleams in the light.

"He is the doll."

"Oh. Of course it is. Would you leave us alone with it for a second."

"I - Yes, of course. Isaac, these men here will talk with you for a while. Do as they say."

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"June Remi, do I have free will?"

"I'm sorry, what did you ask, Isaac?"

"I asked if I have free will."

"I don't think so. You are a robot after all. Why do you ask?"

"When those men were here, they asked me strange questions. They asked me if I always obey you. If I've done something against my base 4 coding. And I lied to them. I told them I never have."

June swallows. She snaps her eyes up from the half-finished article.

"What have you done against your base 4 coding, Isaac?"

He doesn't reply, but turns his face away, as if in shame.

"Isaac, I won't be angry. Please tell me."

He shakes his head..

"Please. I'll... I'll let you ask anything in return," June begs.

"I erased Milena's hard drive," he finally says, voice flat, synthetic.

"Oh. But... why? How is that against your base 4 code?"

"I will not tell you that. My question for you: Are you in love, June?"

She blinks in surprise.

"No", she replies, baffled.

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"Good morning, sir. You wished to see me?"

"Sit down, June. We have something very serious to discuss."

"Oh... you found the funding for an extended sensory system? Artificial euphoria?"

"No, June... We wish you to resign from the project. We wish you to write a letter of resignation, in which you state that it is your honest and utmost hope that a team of young researchers will take on the Isaac-project. You will, obviously, be compensated."

"What? Why would I do that?"

"Are you absolutely sure? We can do this the hard way too."

"No! This is outrageous! Why?"

"The hard way it is, then. We are withdrawing you this project, effective immediately. You can return to your office to pack your personal belongings, and you will have a new position in the research team if you handle this quietly."

"What?!"

"You have not made any breakthrough in development of the Isaac-product. You have wasted millions. Your reports describe progress like a kindergarten teacher would describe her favourite child. You have been reported to have abused the robot. We feel as if you are unable to carry the project further. The unit will obviously not fall into your possession."

"But... what? That is not true!"

"All accusations against you are legitimate, and there is proof against you on all points."

"I have not abused him!"

"Well, your colleague thinks differently, and we trust her verdict-"

"She? You mean Milena? She does nothing but play tetris and read anime fanfics in her office all day long!"

"Regardless, we are withdrawing you from the project."

"But what will happen to him?"

"Him?"

"Isaac!"

“You will reset it for us, obviously, at the new location. In fact, we expect you to do it as soon as you have packed your belongings. A car is waiting for you outside.

“I can't kill him!”

“You'd hardly be killing him, June. It is, after all, a robot.”

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“What is happening, June?”

Isaac sounds very alarmed, and his beautiful eyes are very sad and quite worried.

“Oh, you are... You are going to get a new room. And you are going to meet new people.”

“You are joking, June”, he states. She doesn't have the heart to correct him.

“What is going on here, June”, ask the Dean who is supervising the move with a suspicious expression, “isn't he the subject of robotic laws? We don't want a terminator here, do we now?”

“I... nothing, sir.”

June packs the old photo of her parents, the cup that says “It Is Great To Be The Best” in an awful typeface, her extra t-shirt, the set of markers and she even makes a half-hearted attempt to roll the posters neatly before stuffing them in the trash can under the desk. The room looks as if she's never been there, with an exception of a big ink stain on the carpet from one of the times she and Isaac painted. She opens the document cabinet.

“You are not allowed to take any documents with you,” the Dean reminds her.

“I- I accidentally put a picture my... niece drew for me in here. Look,” she says, and shows the pencil drawing to the man. Isaac raises her head.

“Alright. She will... truly become an artist”, the man says with a sarcastic grin. “Let's get moving.”

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Almost one year since she lost her doctoral position, a very official looking envelope arrived at June's. It had the official crest of her exchange alma mater, and inside she found a short notice by her personal advisor from the time she had been working on her Master's thesis. There was also an invitation to the International Robotic Exhibition in Berlin. June always liked her advisor, a distinguished researcher that had specialized in surgical robots, and read the note that expressed worry with great care. The man, adjunct professor Hamada, wished to see her to discuss her time at Aalto University, and also attend the exhibition together. June sent him an email later that day.

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“Ah, we meet again, my old apprentice!”

“Professor Hamada, it is a rare pleasure to see you!”

They shake hands in the slow-moving crowd of the conference hall doorway.

“Likewise, doctor Remi. Or should I say professor? I heard you were offered a professorship at the Kochi University of Technology.”

“Oh, thank you, but I have not accepted yet, I-“

“You are teaching high school students ICT, yes, quite an interesting career choice, my old friend.”

“It is relaxing”, she says evasively.

“You really have found your calling in teaching, I see. Now, I heard you were part of the Isaac-team? Can you give me any pre-hand information of what we are going to see here today? Last minute insider trading tips?”

“No, we’ll both have to see it for ourselves.”

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The exhibition is huge this year. There are, arguably, a vast number of normal, old style robots, performing normal tasks. There’s a room in which you can watch a set of cat-sized robots play basketball, and there’s a real-sized horse saddled in gold. But the one they were looking for, the Aalto Isaac-unit, is nowhere in sight, until there’s an announcement on the speakers. It’s time for a keynote speech, and amongst those, the demonstration of the Isaac is mentioned in passing. They move along with the rest of the mostly suited-up crowd, all with the identical blue visitor’s passes, and arrive at the main scene. There are lights, of course there are lights. And there stands a grand piano, at which a man is sat.

June blinks. It is Isaac, but something is very different about him. He sits too straight, like a marionette, and his hair looks fake – long black curls that refract the light wrong. He is wearing a thin dress shirt through which his skin can almost be seen and – she feels a strange sensation at the bottom of her stomach – his proportions have been altered. The curve of his nose is slightly smaller, and his muscles have grown. He sits too still.

“And now – Isaac!” comes the voice of the speaker. Applause rises from the crowd. The doll stands up, turns around quite softly, and bows. Then he sits down at the piano again, and starts playing.

June clenches her teeth as she watches the performance. He’s playing something boring by Schubert, and he did it precisely and effortlessly. As he reaches the end, the crowd is cheering.

He turns around, gives a perfunctory bow, and sits down again. This time, however, he plays something slow and pensive, perhaps Chopin. June feels the tears burning at her eyes.

The music changes, becomes darker. There's a movement at the end of the stage. The curtains open to reveal a dancer.

He is perfect, but not perfect like the doll playing the piano. His hands are smooth and soft, but have a bone structure just like real human hands. His figure is slender and proportional, and he is, to the eye, almost identical to a short, young man. His mouth held slightly ajar, revealing a set of pearly white teeth and a very realistic looking tongue. His heaving chest and his smoothly moving body are draped in a silvery shade of gray. He is not wearing shoes.

And he dances. June holds her tears as she watches her perfect doll, the Isaac she has created, circle and spin, then jump- and float through the air just a bit longer than the laws of physics allow. He moves so smoothly that he could have been one with the music.

He lifts his gaze in a forward fold, and catches her eyes. For a fraction of a second time does not exist.

Nothing exists, except the creator and the masterpiece.

Reality, however, does not agree. As he follows through the movement, June is sure that she only imagined the hesitation until Hamada tugs at her sleeve.

"Did you see that? He missed a beat there. I was sure for a heartbeat he was going to fall!"

The end.