

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 day. Heavy stainless steel doors with biometric identification locks closed it off from the rest of the floor. Inside its sacred walls, you'd find neither treasures nor oozing liquids, nor nuclear reactors - though rumours say one of those rests below campus - but instead four rather tiny offices and two dark work spaces, with those same white shelves, coffee-stained plexiglass desks, bright green chairs, gray carpets and stainless steel door handles that remind the whole Innopolis of the importance of whiteboard innovation. At first glance, the offices are not much different from, say, those of your average faculty accountant's.

There are some key differentiators, however. Firstly, there are no windows. Secondly, the air ducts are miniscule, and muffle out all sounds, as do the sound proof walls. To further isolate this hallowed hallway, the computers inside are not connected to the internet, and run an operating system designed by some of the elusive people native to this habitat. And by that, you might deduce we are dealing with computer scientists.

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 Milena and she's the reigning department champion of the game, and currently very close to clearing the whole screen, when the security system gives a beep. Startled, she drops the L-shaped piece. Grinding her teeth in frustration, she closes the game just as one of her doctoral student colleagues enters. It's just 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 Milena how to program Tetris onto the computers.

"Did you have a nice holiday?" Milena shouts out as the girl passes her open office door. She has to repeat the question once the girl takes off her headphones.

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

"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."

"Hmm. It doesn't really matter," she says, eyes shifting to her office door, "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 —"

"Oh yeah. Kiss the doll hello from me."

“What to do with you, Isaac, what to do...”

There's no real point in speaking to the sleeping doll, she knows this, but sometimes it's hard to remember. His dusty eyes stare off into oblivion, as he sits there on her desk, 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, and his hands are perhaps too smooth and too soft, but apart from that, he's 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. Well, it's a little dusty at the moment.

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 cydon speakers greet her welcome in a cool, female voice with a Finnish accent. Or perhaps it's Japanese; she never really learnt to tell the difference.

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

She taps a few keys and presses enter, sending a slight flutter through the android's eyes. 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 wakes 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 was given by a well-paid theatre student, and opens his eyes fully, revealing their deep blue to the world. Programmed to blink once every four seconds, since 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. June makes a note.

“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, like a young man just woken up from a rather pleasant daydream. While charming, it's not the correct emotional response, and June makes a note.

“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 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,” June adds, to explain the rather bizarre choice of activity. Isaac doesn't miss a beat. He never does.

“What does spicy food taste like?”

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

“What does spicy food 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?”

It takes quite a bit of work to prepare a sense of taste. It also 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 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.

The Dean of the Faculty of Robotics, June's superior by many levels of obscure university hierarchy, 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, miss Remi, 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.”

“To appease investors?”

“... yes.”

“Good. But by the end of the year, I expect a product, else I am withdrawing this project from you.”

“Yes, sir.”

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 as she sets up the video camera.

“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.

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. The liquid will go into a small container that will be drained at the same time as her excess oils.

“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. Teach 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, uh, investing in blockchain gaming stock, it's an investor company's annual...”

He tilts his head again, blinks, slower than usual, then shakes his head. Expressing a preference was rather unusual, if not unprecedented, behaviour, usually triggered by analysis of micro expressions. June makes a note.

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

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

Once again, he shakes his head. His beautiful eyes rest on hers. She pauses, and twists her hands in her lap, then turns off the camera.

“What do you know about Asimov, Isaac?”

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 neural network thins - that sort of thing usually amuses her - 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?"

"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.

"Remi, what the actual fuck!"

She has the audacity to laugh.

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

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

"I'm- I'm very close to it."

Milena left the office without another word.

"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 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 gift. 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 dull.

“I’m sorry, Isaac, but you can only taste things in liquid form.”

“It is only a small shortcoming. How do I use the pencil?”

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 man, and a researcher that June vaguely remembers reading and loathing. They make it clear that they are extremely busy by demonstratively poking their fancy smart watches, every four seconds or so.

“You will show us your work. We are here to evaluate your ‘progress’”, states the Dean’s right hand.

“I am 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 are marginal novelties in 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 himself - rather poorly, she’ll be the first to admit - and a pair of hand-me-down jeans from June’s room mate.

“Hey there Isaac,” June greets him.

“Good afternoon,” he says, without missing a beat, fluttering 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," June replies, and makes a note.

"Of course. 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."

"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 and turns off the camera. She snaps her eyes up from the clipboard, and sets the pen down.

"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 a memory off the hard drive," he finally says, voice flat, synthetic.

"Oh. But... why? And 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.

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

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

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

"No, June... We think you should resign from the project. We hope you will 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 be compensated. I made sure of it, despite opposition. You will have a new position in the research team if you handle this quietly."

"I don't get a say? Why would I do that?"

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

“What?” June stares at the man in disbelief, “Explain, please.”

“You have wasted millions in investor and taxpayer money. You have not made a single scientifically significant breakthrough in development of the Isaac-product, and your reports describe progress like a kindergarten teacher would describe her favourite child. We feel as if you are unable to carry the project further. And... You have been reported to have abused the unit. The robot will obviously not fall into your possession.”

“I... what? Granted, I haven't published in over a year, but... *That* is not true. No, I will not resign quietly.”

“The hard way it is, then. We are withdrawing this project, effective immediately. You can return to your office to pack your personal belongings. I warn you that these accusations will be found legitimate, and there is substantial evidence against you on all points.”

“I have not abused him!”

“Well, your colleagues and peers think differently, and we trust their verdicts-”

“You mean Milena? She does nothing but play tetris, read fanfic and eat thai food in her office all day long!”

“She sounds charming, but we as a university are still withdrawing from the project.”

“But... what will happen to him?”

“Him?”

“Isaac!”

“You will reset it for us, obviously, at the investor's research facility. 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. Don't be dramatic. These things happen,” the Dean scoffs, “And it is, after all, just a robot.”

“What is happening, June?”

Isaac sounds alarmed, to the capacity he can sound anything, and his beautiful eyes are sad and quite worried.

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

“I don't want to,” he states.

“Now it doesn't want to obey orders?”, asks the Dean who is supervising the move with a suspicious expression, “Is it going to go full-on terminator on us next?”

“He's... He's just programmed that way, sir,” June lies.

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 dark ink stain on the grey carpet from one of the times she and Isaac painted. She opens the document cabinet.

"Look, you can't take any documents with you," the Dean reminds her.

"I- I accidentally put a picture my... niece drew for me in here. Look," she lies, and shows the crude pencil drawing. The Dean raises his eyebrows.

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

Isaac raises his head.

"Alright," he says.

Isaac doesn't miss a beat. He never does.

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.

"Ah, we meet again, my old apprentice!"

"Professor Hamada, what a rare pleasure it is to see you in person!"

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

"Likewise, doctor Remi. Or should I say adjunct professor? I heard you were offered tenure track at the Kochi University of Technology."

"Oh, thank you, but I have not accepted yet, see I-"

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

"It is relaxing", she says evasively, "at times."

“I did not expect you’d find your calling in shaping young minds. Now, I heard you were part of the Isaac-team? Can you give me any insider information on what we are going to see here today? Last minute trading tips?”

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

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 pastel-colored bots play basketball, and there’s a real-sized mechanical 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 identical blue visitor’s passes, and arrive at the main stage. There are lights, of course there are lights. And there stands a grand piano, at which a man is sat. His face is blown up to epic proportions on the huge screen behind him.

June blinks. It is Isaac - or at least, an Isaac. 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. His hands are too smooth, but there’s nothing soft to this android.

“And now – a demonstration of the Aalto Isaac!” comes the cool voice of the announcer. Courteous applause rises from the crowd. The doll stands up, turns around quite smoothly, 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 does it with precision. Effortless. When he reaches the end, the crowd applauds.

He turns around, gives a perfunctory bow, and sits down again. This time, however, he plays something slow and pensive. 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. His figure is slender and proportional, and he is, to the eye, almost identical to a short, young man. His mouth held in a soft smile reveals a set of pearly white teeth. His heaving chest and his smoothly moving body are draped in a silvery shade of gray. He is not wearing shoes. He moves so smoothly that he could have been one with the music.

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 could possibly allow; or perhaps, it's just for June that time stands still.

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 so sure he was going to fall!"

The end.