

Before there was Google or Wikipedia or Bitcoin, there was Isidore, and before Isidore came into this world she lived for years inside the head of Hector Callias. I could never explain my father's feeling for her, except that it was more like the connection between a person and the musical instrument they own and cannot play than the spark between two people.

She was just a name at first. *Isidore, Isidore, Isidore* on the tip of his tongue piercing all our days and nights with promises. There would be a day when Isidore paid tribute to his beef stifado or welcomed customers to Kallikrates or joined the family for Christmas holidays, sitting through *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Bah Humduck*. Isidore was the breeze that had followed him since childhood, urging him on to what we never knew.

She came to live with us around the time I entered grade five and stayed mostly in the dining room, which Hector had converted into a workshop. In those days she was still an open skull bursting with wires attached to a monitor and a hard drive. While Hector developed her intelligence, Effy worked on the face that took almost a year to perfect, this face with its liquid brown eyes and soft upper cheeks (compulsory traits of sex dolls) that took a surprise turn in the lower half, growing more angular and less submissive the farther south it wandered. Below the nose tip, Isidore was Thutmose's Nefertiti, right down to the muscles visible under the neck and the suggestion of a cleft chin.

"So no man will ever mess with her," Effy would say. "A touch of boy. Have you noticed that, Bronte, in the original bust, and do you remember how old it is?"

"Fourteenth century."

"Fourteenth century *pro Christou*. BC, not AD."

"Yeah, yeah. Doing homework here."

"This is better than homework."

To a child it seemed strange how the bodies and faces they admired were usually severed. A head. A torso. Effy's half-scale copy of Nike of Samothrace, which she commissioned as a thirtieth birthday present to herself and plunked in the middle of the showroom. I didn't get the point of it then, how the shyest men drew courage from the goddess of victory and the snobs told themselves a sex bot factory must be a type of cultural centre, but it worked. Like bugs drawn to wine, they fell where they landed, tipsy with assurances that their desires, their needs, their kinks were serious business, too serious to leave to any other manufacturer. Even when the customer was an ass, Hector and Effy would find a way to elevate the person and the situation, an apotheosis that loosened wallets and resulted in many personal referrals and repeat orders.

And so, the cash cow that was Kallikrates, which sold the most expensive hyper-realistic adult dolls and bots in the world based on "all the latest research in AI programming, speech and language, emotional intelligence, anatomy, skin, craniofacial medicine, and visual prosthetics" (among other specialties, as noted in our official brochure), led Hector to his destiny.

Isidore had no purpose aside from becoming better. Year after year, the consultants came, consulted, got paid, and went away. Year after year, Isidore grew more human. By the end of junior high, her head would find me if I entered the room and called her name. The mechanism was jerky at first but gradually the motion became indistinguishable from the sideways turn of a human neck. Next came the facial expressions. No less than forty-three muscles produce a smile in human. Isidore had thirty-six actuators, well above the usual number, but Hector and Effy were still not satisfied. I figured they might lose interest at this stage but the work never stopped and, in fact, moved on to life-altering problems such as whether Sid should ever produce an insincere smile, engaging the *zygomaticus major* muscle only, or whether she should look up left or right when searching for a word or choose randomly.

I'm not sure when it became clear that Sid would never be finished and had already passed a point of no return but the first time Urs Binder came to the showroom I glimpsed the future, as they say. Back then, he was younger than most of the clientele. Mid-twenties. Open shirt, three undone buttons. Smooth facial skin and a head of uniform dirty blond locks shaped like breakfast sausages. Once he spots me, he displays a full set of chalky teeth that says someone's been overdoing the white strips. When he leaves Effy tells me he doesn't 'get' artificial intelligence.

"How so?"

"Never mind. He's just like the rest of them. Wants a trained seal."

When Effy's cover slips, it's usually because she's failed to make a sale. She drops the customer kit beside my notebook and perches on the edge of the desk, banged wrists crossed in her lap.

"Imagine what these guys would do with Sid," I say. "She'd tell that one he uses way too much product."

"Customer's always right."

"He's a walking self-care factory."

"Isidore will never be for sale. You know that, Bronte. The average customer doesn't even know about her. For now, we keep it that way."

Later that night when I'm applying pimple cream to my chin with the bathroom door open, I hear Effy tell Hector that Binder has asked for a bot that could randomly beg him for sex, ideally with his wife present, since this scenario would provide him with maximum arousal. Hector never reacts to other people's sexual fantasies because he places Kallikrates above personal feelings. This time, however, the conversation continues down another road with Effy admitting she told Binder that Kallikrates has been working on a prototype that might one day be able to fulfill his request.

Binder offers her half-a-million dollars on the spot for the completed model, a price that casts Hector into silence. I don't hear much after that except Effy talking, talking, asking for Hector to consider it a little longer and then Hector bringing up how they owe so much to Isidore because of what she's showed them. After such a remark, it was impossible to guess how things would go or how quickly they would change, but the last thing I heard Hector say in a loud voice was "*Ποτέ, ποτέ.*"

Never. Never would Isidore be sold.

But then she is.