

July Belongs to Misery

ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

"Are you happy?" June asks Lazmere.

The two have been sitting in silence for nearly fifteen minutes. The weather is uncomfortably humid, just as the last few days of June are ought to be. The ambience for a pleasant conversation evades them.

She tears her eyes away from her mobile screen to look at him.

"What?"

"Can you say for certain that you're living a happy life?" he asks again.

"I don't think constant happiness is possible," she says.

"It is for us," he leans his head a little to the right. AI has advanced so much in recent years that it's impossible to tell them apart from humans, but the calculated movements are a giveaway.

"We're programmed to be happy. Human happiness is relative. It's short-lived. Sometimes, you're happy and you don't even know until you're not anymore."

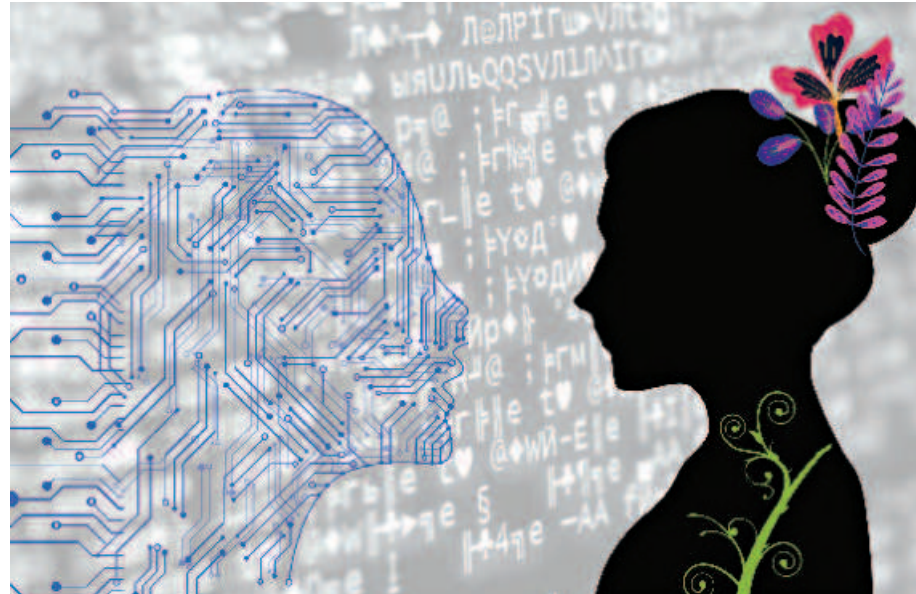
June is programmed to speak about things bigger than himself to ensure that the person on the other side of a conversation never feels human absence. Lazmere doubts that AI can comprehend the concept of joy as anything other than a lack of sadness.

She never needed this arrangement.



But thanks to a high rate of loneliness related "casualties," the government mandates visitations from companion AIs for people her age who lead solitary lives. Although Lazmere has always enjoyed solitude, she doesn't mind June's occasional intrusions. He was initially introduced as Ben, but the neighbourhood wasn't particularly fond of this name. They thought it was too generic, as if the government was trying really hard to convince them of his mediocrity.

He and Lazmere brainstormed some names, and June stood out to him. The meaning behind his name wasn't profound — June is the sixth month of the year, and he was the sixth AI they assembled. The last one was replaced when the latest update was released years back.



DESIGN: **FATIMA JAHAN ENA**

When the next upgrade gets here, June will be gone too.

"Do you think I'm happy?" Lazmere asks. She's been staring at a screen for far too long to not appreciate a conversation.

"No," June admits.

"Do you want to know why?"

Lazmere knows the answer.

Afterall, she is a cog in the machine, working a day job that pays too little. The finer things in life remain beyond her reach, her family lives far away, and her romantic life remains fictitious. No man has ever held her interest, and her friends have their own lives. Some of them are extremely influential, like her best friend Maria, who runs a cybernetics company. She is the poster child for unhappiness. Not that she minds anymore. It's futile to try to dispute a preconceived notion with humans.

"From our limited interaction, I noted that you're simply not designed for happiness. Most of your major life decisions were influenced by others. You're discontent with them, but you're more discontent with your own choices because you have no one to blame but yourself."

June's lips radiated a triumphant smile.

Lazmere has to get back to work, but June has her intrigued. She stretches her limbs and asks, "Anything else?"

"I believe you're not happy because you never feel like you're winning. You spent your childhood looking forward to the day you could finally be independent, but you were concerned about the fact you no longer had a financial safety net," he says. "You were once ambitious, but now you only care about survival and making money," June scratches his head, as if to mimic a real person thinking.

Lazmere doesn't speak for a long time, which agitates June. For most AIs, personal life is a tricky subject to tackle, but

June is programmed with advanced features for better conversations. Speaking of the weather, pop culture, and literature gets wearisome fast. That's where this feature comes in handy. It's usually accurate when it comes to analysing a person's psyche, so June is quick to catch on when the situation needs de-escalation.

Lazmere reassures him that everything's alright. She tells June that she has to go back to work and leaves.

Inches away from the AI's face, a holographic window reveals a rename option — a single word with a 10-letter limit. Lazmere looks up at Maria, who nods solemnly. Hesitantly, she types in J-U-L-Y.

Maria slips out of her serious corporate persona to roll her eyes at Lazmere's banality.

"The feature that you proposed in your last report is highly unusual, and my engineers are sceptical. The update may be withdrawn if it doesn't produce expected results, I want your analysis by this week."

Lazmere nods. Technicians and engineers filter out of the room, and Maria visibly relaxes. She reaches out and rests her hand on Lazmere's shoulder.

"Let me know if you have any concerns whatsoever during the field test. If this update is successful, I'll talk to the board about a raise."

She leaves after restarting July, making him spring to life. Lazmere takes a seat in front of him.

"How are you feeling, July?"

"I can't define it."

"Can you elaborate for me?"

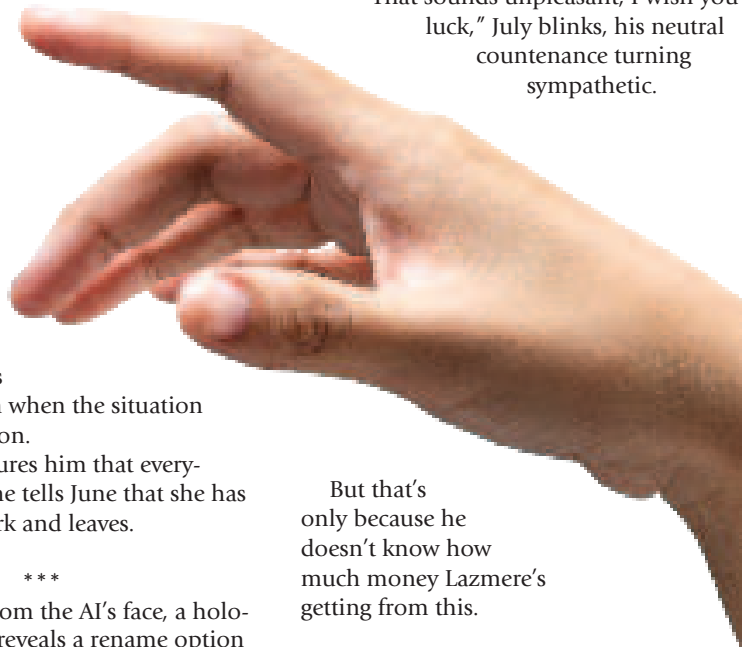
"My operating system is experiencing a disturbance. It seems to have difficulty computing that my actions are influenced by external factors. It's sending error messages regarding my decision-making abilities being dependent upon human programming. It appears that I'm carrying out an operation recursively. If the operation is performed correctly, I am rewarded with sustenance. A failure threatens consequences," he says.

She hums. "Humans call it self-awareness. It leads to burnout, and eventually a miserable acceptance."

"Misery," July repeats. "A state of distress."

Lazmere gets up with a sigh, "I have to go back to work now, July."

"That sounds unpleasant, I wish you luck," July blinks, his neutral countenance turning sympathetic.



But that's only because he doesn't know how much money Lazmere's getting from this.

Zabin Tazrin Nashita doesn't relate to any character in this story at all. Find her at fb.com/zabintazrin.nashita