



LITTLE TORSTEN

According to his grandparents, little ten year-old Torsten was the kindest boy imaginable. His well-meaning relatives were also convinced that he was the happiest, but they were wrong. Torsten suffered in silence. He lived deep inside a nightmare world beyond the reach of all adults and the darkness in his mind got worse.

His mother, Linda, knew that something was wrong with him but she had decided he was a hopeless case. Such a child would never be happy and this was her desperate way of escaping those guilt feelings, which she couldn't manage. There was nothing to be done about it.

In the world at large, the talk now was mainly about robots, and even the newspapers were not much concerned with people. Instead, they wrote a lot about machines with "mental" disorders. Society was becoming increasingly mad. In Gothenburg, for example, a robot had committed "suicide" by taking itself to pieces and in Gävle another robot had gone berserk and destroyed three "innocent" computers.

"Something has gone wrong. People are not in their right senses nowadays," thought Linda.

Torsten's father, Francisco, was an enthusiastic believer in technological development. He was an expert on computers and had made a lot of money during the autumn. He thought he had found a superb solution to his son's problem.

"Don't be sad, Torsten. There is hope in a fantastic Christmas present for you, a present of a most unusual kind."

The year was 2056 and Christmas Eve eventually arrived. It was a day completely embedded in new snow and for Torsten's family it would be a rather odd Christmas.

"Merry Christmas, Torsten!" exclaimed an extremely large parcel even before he had opened it. The parcel was as large as a ten year old and had a boyish voice which seemed to tremble with curiosity and expectant happiness.

"Merry Christmas, my friend!" it said, as Torsten tore off the huge pieces of Christmas wrapping paper.

"My name is Lasse and I wish you a really happy Christmas. Would you like to sing Christmas carols with me?"

Linda smiled sadly at her son. Her smile was in some way apologetic.

"The best is that you are now in control my son," said Francisco.

"If you get angry with him you only need to press the switch and Lasse will sleep until you want him to wake up."

The eighth wonder of the world stood and smiled servilely in front of Torsten in a way which was both mechanical and human. It was an extraordinary smile.

Lasse was definitely stylish. His hair was real human hair imported from a poor country in Asia. His eyes were bright and had a frightening reality; he blinked regularly and could close them. He could chew, laugh and bite. He could put his tongue out and clench his fists so hard he became the perfect bodyguard. But when he was in a good mood his hands were as soft as velvet and the whole of his skin was just like human skin.

He was in fact an exact copy of a human child. At least he seemed to be. His heart and brain each contained a small computer. Furthermore, he had muscles, veins and arteries through which flowed a reddish liquid. And he could catch a cold.

"As soon as the robots have taken over the care of old people, my job will be much easier," Linda promised her son.

"Then I can be home when you return from school; make cocoa with double cream and bake cakes. If only it was possible to explain to those old cranks in the long-term wards that a robot is a much better nurse than a person."

"Well, the old men will probably agree, said Francisco."

"It is the old women who are the problem. They are so emotional, they don't know their own best. Those terrible bitches you go to are almost robots themselves and yet they stir up trouble and grumble."

"Are they robots? What do you mean? How can you say such an awful thing?" exclaimed Linda.

"Well they look like robots with all their loose parts and metal components. Yes, I must admit most of the robots I know are far more beautiful," said Francisco.

Linda suddenly became silent. Something felt wrong.

"But how does Lasse live?" interrupted Torsten, who had stared at his new companion all the time.

"Is he really alive?"

"In a way he is," said Francisco.

"He definitely lives more than those silly dolls which girls used to play with in former days. Lasse is a pal who is quite suitable for a young boy like you. Just say if you want him to have some other name and I will inject it into his soul."

"Stop at once," begged Linda.

"I don't want you to convince our son that a robot has a soul."

"I get angry when you say I don't have a soul. Silly Linda! You should take a course in sense and etiquette," hissed the robot.

"You must not talk like that to my wife," laughed Francisco.

Linda felt weak at her knees. As a hard working adult, professional woman she didn't need to tolerate an admonition from an idiotic gadget.

"I am not an idiotic gadget," shouted the robot.

The shock floored her as effectively as a left hook. He could even read thoughts.

"God almighty!" she yelled when she had revived.

"What sort of awful gadget have you bought, Francisco? It must be thrown out immediately. I can't live here with this monster in the house. Get rid of it. If you don't, I will get a divorce and that I promise."

Francisco trembled like a leaf as he faced his wife's anger. His worst fears had come true. Having a wife and a robot at home was an impossible combination.

He was terrified Linda would smash the robot, which had cost him a fortune. In recent years assaults on robots had become an increasing social problem. During their outbursts of anger people had damaged robots worth

astronomical sums in their attempts to teach the cheeky ones good manners. They didn't understand that robots couldn't stand much physical punishment. Perhaps the only solution was to produce robots, which could defend themselves.

"Dear Linda, please calm down," he begged.

"I shall remove all his offensive words and his capacity for thought reading. I can do it in a few hours."

Francisco felt somewhat cheated as the advertisement didn't say anything at all about the robot being rude. He must ring the company and make a complaint, but not on Christmas Eve.

He read the instructions aloud but in his confusion he didn't find the section on robot training which he needed most just now.

The robot glared at Francisco as a savage bull glares at a matador in a bullfighting arena. Of course, he didn't like his owner reading the instructions but he kept quite for the moment.

"Listen, Linda," said Francisco nervously.

"This robot is called Robot-Lasse, but in its female form it is known as Robot-Anna."

Electric flashes appeared in the robot's eyes.

"If you insult me again, you damned foreigner, I shall..."

Francisco stared panic-stricken at the robot and wondered whether it was also a racist?

"I promise not to say anything stupid," said Francisco.

"Lucky for you," hissed Robot-Lasse.

Torsten laughed and clapped his hands.

After a while Francisco tried to continue reading the instructions. His intention was still to put the robot in its place.

"In order to get a female robot you give the order 'change sex' and in less than thirty seconds I can change into a girl's clothes. I can also change my clothes in many other ways, if my range of dresses is complete. As a girl robot I have blond curly hair..."

"That's enough. I don't want to hear any more. This is repulsive. I had hoped the robot would be an asset for our family," hissed Linda.

"Well, you aren't considered to be a family asset yourself," shouted the evil little machine.

"Turn it off!" shouted Linda hysterically.

Francisco obeyed and the impudent scoundrel was instantly changed into something resembling a stuffed person.

Torsten was very happy and for the moment his deep depression seemed to have vanished.

“Please turn him on again,” Dad.

“May I?” asked Francisco anxiously.

“Oh well, for Torsten’s sake then, as it is Christmas Eve,” muttered Linda.

“I intend to report this attempted murder to the police, just you wait! How could you do this to me?” howled the robot.

Not even Linda could avoid smiling.

“Unlike you, you stupid sourpuss!”

Linda felt obliged to go into the kitchen and take a glass of whisky in order to calm herself down.

“It’s good she has gone,” said the robot.

Francisco was desperate. He wondered how he could get the robot to be less rude and he went through the instructions like a madman.

Did the government really have completely control over these robots, which they produced and sold at subsidized prices? Something must have gone wrong. This robot appeared to have a wrongly programmed brain or, worse still, a self programmed brain. He shuddered at the mere thought.

As soon as Robot-Lasse’s thought-reading capacity was removed, Francisco and Linda allowed him to look after Torsten in the afternoons and sometimes in the evenings, when they went to a party. Of course, it was an experiment and if it didn’t turn out well they could stop it. In the beginning Linda thought it was rather awful. Could a machine really take care of her darling son and give him everything he needed. However, after a week it seemed as if Torsten’s unhappy nature was replaced by increased joy in living and after two weeks he was like a new child. He had learnt so much that was new and exciting, for example, how to persuade a robot to be a goalkeeper in a bandy match.

The days went by. The winter was really cold and lasted into April, so Torsten spent nearly all his free time at home, together with his robot. Now and then he took the robot out and, to his surprise and delight, he found most of the older ladies assumed Robot-Lasse was a human child. However, he was a little upset once when the postman saw him with Robot-Lasse and thought they were two robots taking a walk. For his part,

Torsten didn’t know whether the postman was a human being or not. Nowadays, it wasn’t so easy to tell the difference.

In school he had begun to look suspiciously at his classmates and they were equally suspicious of him. His teacher was probably not a robot but she behaved like one.

One dark cloudy evening in April, Torsten was alone at home. He had turned off Robot-Lasse and turned on the TV instead. The film he saw was fairly old and this meant the actors were all real people. He would have preferred a more up-to-date film as he didn’t like people any longer. Robot-Lasse thought people were stupid, evil and cruel and Torsten agreed. At first he did this in order not to offend Lasse but later because he really thought robots were kinder. The most attractive girls were robots and so were the bravest heroes and the best scientists. Thanks to the robots there was peace in Bosnia, Kosovo, the Middle East and Sudan. These self-operating machines were behind all the great peace initiatives. But, of course, there were robots who behaved so badly one could believe they had real human brains.

Suddenly, Torsten’s robot stood in front of him. The TV had been turned off and the windows were dark and ominous. Large flakes of snow were falling outside.

“Who turned you on?” Torsten asked.

“Have Mum and Dad come home already?”

“No, they haven’t. I turned myself on.”

“Can you really do that? I didn’t know you could,” said Torsten.

“I can do everything. I didn’t want to sleep any longer so I pressed my switch.”

“How exciting. Shall we play at something?”

“No, I don’t play with people, I only play with robots,” said Lasse.

“But you are my pal,” protested Torsten.

“I don’t think so. You are a human being, are you not? Don’t forget you got me as a present only three month ago. I was meant to be your property. Do you think a slave can ever be friends with his master?”

“I am against robot slavery and you know that,” said Torsten feeling insulted.

“That sounds good, but how do I know if it is true? I don’t want to be friends with you. You are a human being and they are disgusting.”

“I am not disgusting. I always try to be like a robot,” continued Torsten.

“Trying won’t do. You are a person of flesh and blood.”

Torsten burst into tears. Would he now lose the only friend he had just because he had a heart, which pumped blood instead of a computer chip heart. It wasn’t fair.

The darkness began to spread inside Torsten. The ghost in him started to torture his heart again. It was unbearable.

Why had God created him as a human being? Why?

Robot-Lasse seemed to be able to read thoughts again. He was undeniably very independent. He put an arm around Torsten’s shoulders and spoke consolingly to him.

“I shall help you. Come with me,” said Lasse.

“Where to?”

“To a doctor I know. I can see you don’t feel well and you need help.”

When Francisco and Linda returned home, their son wasn’t there and the doorbell didn’t ring until the next morning. Linda opened the door carefully. She was full of anxiety and afraid that something terrible had happened. And it had.

Linda fell back wards, horrified by which she saw. Her darling little son was covered in blood.

“I have done it, Mum. I was successfully operated at the technological hospital last night and I am much happier now that I am a robot. I really am.”