

“Your Honor, the defendant’s droid bit my client. It’s a clear case of negligence.”

“beep-boop...Your Honor, my client, the defendant, doesn’t even own a droid.”

“It’s *true*, your Honor—his unsupervised droid ran across the street and bit my client.”

“beep-boop...if defendant does own a droid, the droid doesn’t have teeth and couldn’t have bitten your client.”

“What the—what do you have to say about this, then?!” the plaintiff’s attorney gestured at his client, whose arms had been replaced with electronic limbs.

I gritted my teeth from the audience. The plaintiff’s attorney grew red in the face as the defendant’s bottorney, Ms. 32930, emitted a gleeful mechanical hum.

“beep-boop...if the defendant’s droid does have teeth, the bite was *de minimus*.”

“*You call loss of both arms ‘de minimus’?*”

“beep-boop...if the bite was not *de minimus*, it was because your client was trespassing.”

“Trespassing? My client was hover-boarding down a *public street*.”

“beep-boop...if plaintiff wasn’t trespassing, he consented to the bite.”

“Your Honor? I’m about to kill this thing.”

With a clank, the bottorney deployed a small shield and settled into as much of a defensive crouch as her trash-can like form would allow. The plaintiff’s lawyer pinched the bridge of her nose. I slipped out of the court room.

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It wasn’t easy, being a law professor for robots. The courtroom performance I had just witnessed, although nothing out of the ordinary, was especially painful given the bottorney was a clinical student of mine at Yale Law School. My Criminal Procedure class consisted entirely of such bottorneys. A program called Gideon's Legacy designed the bots, and sent them to Yale to

become public defenders. Gideon's Legacy intended to provide greater representation for low-income defendants under the motto, "*Preserving Your Right to Effective-Assistance™ Since 2071.*"

The technology wasn't what most would call sophisticated. Obviously. Even so, shriveled funding and wage stagnation had deterred all but the most incompetent of humanoid lawyers from public defense in recent years. Low-budget robots had become the de-facto vanguard of indigent representation. My ambivalence about this development was part of why I'd continued my work in the public defender's office alongside teaching.

Ms. 32930 approached me in the courthouse lobby after trial, directing her beams on me with a gaze I could swear was seeking approval. I smiled, and gently opened her control panel. Just as I thought. The damn Alternative Pleading Switch was stuck again. I made a note of it in my tablet.

"You were a star, Ms. 32930."

Ms. 32930 and I wheeled back to campus, arriving to class just as the last few students plugged into their ports. Socratic™, my teaching assistant, projected a slide show against the wall as I strode to the front of the classroom.

"Today, we'll be talking about client negotiation. Your caseload will be immense. You will need to become skilled at quickly extracting the information you need from your clients, and ignoring irrelevant details."

My students were able to retain and recite black-letter law like...well, like robots. But there was a reason detractors of Gideon's Legacy, myself sometimes included, called the bottorneys 'canned calculators'. Their unsophisticated software struggled to understand human social norms. Judges often complained bottorneys lacked the capacity for normal conversation.

In response, Yale's dean insisted I add a negotiation unit to my syllabus and submit a daily "System Limitations Report" to the Gideon directors so they could improve the next generation. I did my best to log all the functional errors I observed.

"Most of your clients will be in prison. Since the average wait time for a speedy trial is about 12 years, nearly every defendant is considered a flight risk and imprisoned. You'll need to get comfortable questioning clients within a carceral setting."

I projected an image of a 14 year-old boy in robotic cuffs and a jumpsuit. His eyes were wide, and his feet dangled above the floor under the interrogation table.

"This boy was convicted of car-jacking. If he was your client, how might you inform him of his rights and options? Can I get a volunteer to demonstrate?" I pointed to a student in the front row who had her claw extended upwards.

"beep-boop...hello! How are you! What is your favorite animal! Do you have a best friend!"

I immediately recognized the bot's high and friendly tone. Bottorneys were programmed to interact with children differently than adults. I scribbled down "inability to distinguish between juveniles and adults within the criminal system" in my system limitations log. A sea of metallic faces looked up at me expectantly.

"Right, so—good idea—but remember, your juvenile clients will all have judicial waivers, so they'll be tried as adults. Let's try another one."

Socratic™ projected an image of a middle-aged woman with sunken cheeks and receding hair. Dark circles surrounded her eyes, and small sores dotted her face.

"This woman was charged with shoplifting. Witnesses of the alleged crime say she demonstrated manic behavior and erratic movements. What is the first thing you might ask her?"

“beep-boop...you look tired. Do you need a glass of water? Do you need a nap? Would you like me to contact a loved one for you?”

I stared at the student. Gideon’s Legacy frequently emphasized their bots’ ability to recognize and respond to human facial expressions. Engineers had developed the skill set so bottorneys could evaluate jury responses to their arguments, but...apparently this skill set extended beyond jury analysis.

“So...that was...not wrong. It’s good to care about your clients. But you see, this woman is probably just one single client amidst hundreds. You’ll be too busy to really learn about her life. Your responsibility is to inform clients of their *legal* options, and it’s pretty clear this client is...well, you can’t just...okay. Let’s break into small groups.”

I opened my tablet and added “inability to recognize common signs of addiction, failure to suggest a plea deal” to the list of system limitations. As Socratic™ beamed small-group problems to the class, a feeling of panic washed over me, like I’d been caught in a lie.

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After class, I studied my weekly agenda, evaluating how many hours into the night I needed to work before returning home. A mess of overlapping appointments glared back at me. Although I continued to practice in the city’s criminal courts, apathy had gripped me tighter and longer in her fist than I liked to admit. Hours of analyzing bot-cop footage followed by making one plea deal after another had eroded my zeal for public defense to a bare shadow. On my most cynical days, I understood my role as a pawn, legitimizing a system designed to subordinate the most disadvantaged in our society. The reason I had been willing to train a class of robots to become public defenders, something many of my colleagues were not, was because I knew the truth: I was practically a robot already.

My first meeting the next day was a plea deal negotiation for Lila Xerxon. I'd only met Ms. Xerxon once, for approximately 8 minutes. It was more time than I spent with most clients. I vaguely recalled her insisting she had an alibi. Like I hadn't heard that before. As if the judge would care about what was certain to be an insubstantial excuse. I hadn't investigated. Better to just get her through the system, right? I tried to remember her face, but I couldn't recall what I'd seen of her features through the prison's holo-shields.

I stared at my agenda with glazed eyes as Ms. 32930 wheeled by.

"beep-boop...have a good afternoon, Professor!" she trilled.

"Thank you, Ms. 32930, and wonderful work in court today. I'll see you tomorrow." Ms. 32930 came to a halt.

"beep-boop...you won't see me tomorrow because we don't have class tomorrow. If we do have class tomorrow, class is cancelled. If class is not cancelled, I will not be attending. If I *am* attending..." Socratic™ reached down to adjust the offending switch, and sent the bot on her way.

I was often touched by the patience and affection Socratic™ demonstrated for the bots. Perhaps it was because of all she'd seen during her time at Yale. She'd been here for the humanoid student rebellion against the curved grading system in the 2060s, and welcomed the first cohort of bottorneys to Yale's incoming class several years ago. We exchanged tired smiles.

"Professor, I am ready to report today's system limitations to Gideon's Legacy. I have one: Alternative Pleading Switch malfunction. Are there any other limitations you would like me to report?"

Socratic™ stared at me with a gaze more piercing than usual. I thought about the bots' inability to distinguish between juveniles and adults. I thought about their instinct to first approach clients on a personal rather than legal basis.

“I have no other system limitations to report.” I paused. “Socratic™, will you contact the Amazon.com correctional facility for me? Tell them I'd like to meet with Lila Xerxon regarding an alibi.”