



A SCIENCE FICTION ANTHOLOGY

TO THE
CASUAL
OBSERVER

A Science Fiction Anthology

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A Science Fiction Anthology: To The Casual Observer is an anthology of short stories written by the ISF Academy class of 2025 during the Science Fiction Interdisciplinary Unit of Science and English, in the academic year 2021/22. The following eighteen stories were carefully selected by this year's Editorial Team.

Scientific observation is the reception of knowledge through accurate tools and instruments. A casual observer may receive different knowledge, but is this experience less valid? The scientific answer to this question would be yes, but Science-Fiction is an oxymoron after all. Perhaps there is more to see between these pages, something that warrants more than just casual observations?

Accompanying these stories is artwork, created by our Visual Arts students. Each piece of artwork was heavily inspired by a science fiction story, but generated with full creative freedom. We hope that these pieces expand and enrich your imagination.

A Science Fiction Anthology, To The Casual Observer.

,
The Class of 2025
Science Fiction Editorial Team



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Ambitio

Jingyan Xie



illustrated by Queena

Ambitio

By Jingyan Xie

I regret my ignorance. I regret my hubris. I regret my ambition.

The day was bleak. A fluid reeking of saccharine dripped down the melting sky. The sun, scantily hanging at the periphery of the horizon, cast specks of light through the branches of the willow tree onto the cracked sidewalk.

A young pregnant woman hurried past. *Click, clack, click, clack*, her black heels sounded a brisk tapping. The tapping stopped inside a busy cafe. The young woman stopped to stroke her swollen stomach tenderly, as a delighted smile crept onto her face. Her thoughts were interrupted by a cordial voice.

“Morning, It’s a busy day, isn’t it?”

She turned her head to see a familiar face. An elegant woman, attired in a beige coat and red scarf, smiled benignly at her. Her light brown eyes twinkled and the wrinkles around her eyes compressed together with age. She was in a fine fettle. She didn’t look like a seventy-year-old woman. The young woman had been seeing her in the café for a little over a month. Since then, they had become friends.

“Why, yes!” the young woman exclaimed. “I never expected to see so many people at the cafe on a holiday morning. I can’t even find a seat.”

The older woman chuckled. “Well, Briana, would you like to sit down with me?”

“I’d love to!” Briana agreed, and ensconced herself on the other side of the table and said “You’re too kind, Ava.”

Ava smiled at the compliment. “How’s the baby?” Ava asked as she stood up to caress Briana’s stomach.

“Alright, she’s quite an energetic one,” Briana laughed. “Dr. Tres found out she was a little overweight when I did my NT-”

A call from the desk interrupted the conversation; “1345, a grande cup of cinnamon latte’s ready!”

“That’s my call.” Briana stood up to pick up her drink.

Silence prevailed for a moment. The two women, one old, one young tacitly turned to their coffee. *Identical flavors, identical size, identical movements.* They sipped their warm drinks, with the AC blowing down at them. The drinks soon turned cold.

“I want to name her Cina. She’s so lively. I’m sure she would be like my husband. Bold, and endearing. Never afraid to say what is right. Quick to her feet. But, it’s too soon to know,” Briana chuckled as her hands nursed her cup.

“She is brave. But I’m afraid stubborn is the best word to describe her,” Ava murmured... Pausing slightly, she continued, “Sorry, you’re like my smaller twin. I can’t help but think about my daughter when you talk about Cina.”

Briana smiled and said “Likewise, since our first encounter, you seem so cordial. We’ve never met before, but everything you do rings a bell. As though someone has done that next to me for years on end. I just can’t recall who and why. Maybe we’ve congregated in a previous life?”

“Or a different time,” Ava responded, as an awkward silence echoed around the room.

“Pardon, what do you mean a different time?” Briana said incredulously.

“The project you are working on?” Ava nonchalantly replied.

Briana thought back deep into her recent memory, for she had no recollection of telling Ava about the classified project.

“The time machine? You’re working on it right now?” Ava asked hastily. Perplexed, Briana frowned. Not even her husband knew that she was working on the highly confidential time machine project. Had she really revealed this information to a stranger, even a stranger she felt an enormous affinity with?

“Yes, I am,” Briana affirmed dubiously.

“How’s it going?” Ava questioned.

“Well, just recently I conceived of a method enabling an algorithm to allocate specific time intervals. By implanting it into an apparatus we can



intercept a black hole, which folds space and time. If successful, we can send people and things to various appointed time periods. Past, present, and future will no longer be a limitation to our society's development; it can be manipulated to our will. We can share modern technology, introduce medical equipment, and progressive education to the past. If we can transport antibiotics along with the new bubonic plague vaccine to 1346, over 25 million will be saved. Similar tactics could be applied to the Chernobyl disaster, and the Haiyan earthquake. We can evacuate the civilians in the affected region..." Briana explained.

Ava sighed, "You sure are certain... Have you ever deliberated over the implications of devising such an innovation? I presume you'll yield the device to the government. What will transpire? Millions of possible feats can be accomplished with it. By no means will the government stop at the extent of intervention you have imagined. Greed and ambition kills. Perhaps taking the nuclear bomb back before any other nation has invented it? What of the consequences? War, my dear, war! It will become inevitable. And death is its eternal concomitant. Millions of lives are claimed by war; women raped, men tortured. We will witness the worst degradation and depravity in human existence."

"But-" Bianna interjected. Ava did not let her interrupt.

"I was a woman in my twenties once too. I was young. I was ambitious. I did not want to fall into mediocrity. I was fanatical about standing out from the rest, becoming the most renowned scientist in all of history. Subsequently, I was offered the role of administering a project which made my ambition feasible. It was a project that, if successful, would permanently change the destiny of mankind. Results were excellent, and the government took it. But it soon came to the attention of my colleagues and myself that our creation was not used as intended. Throughout the process of developing the innovation, there were moments, but I dismissed them. I was paranoid and failed to recognize a possible abuse of power. The consequences of our actions was annihilation. We are accomplices to a holocaust, left with the debris of civilization; one burned and bombed till barely anything was left. Not even enough to be put on display in a 2x2x3-inch box in the museum."

Briana shook her head.

"I don't understand."

"ARE YOU AN IDIOT?"



Ava's hand clenched her empty coffee cup rigidly with anger but then her hands grew limp, her face paled, her wrinkles squeezed together from strain. Time had caught up with her and stripped of her passion, and pride. The elderly woman watched impotently as someone once familiar became an antagonist.

"None of that has happened yet," Briana solaced as she leaned forward to hug Ava over the table.

"But it is reality," Ava muttered.

Tap tap, tap-tap, Ava's fingers twitched. *Tick*, the needle of Ava's watch trembled. She fondled it with her hand. Wrinkles crawled over it like spiderwebs, tight-knit, and organized. She turned her head and averted her gaze towards a window, the sun hung directly above. Its radiance beat down at her, blinding her eyes. Briana followed Ava's gaze, their sight meeting in the reflection on the glass; their faces glistening beside each other. One old, and one young, but awfully alike, curly hair tied in a messy bun, tanned skin, bright brown eyes, a piercing on the left ear, two on the right ear, well rounded chin. Two faces. identical appearance. Briana tilted her head to stare at Ava's features. How could she have not noticed?

"So I was successful. How-" Briana exclaimed, interrupting the captivating silence.

"You really are relentless," Ava interrupted. Briana didn't respond. Ava leaned forward once again and stroked Briana's belly. Slow and steady. Slow and steady. She sat back in her chair. Her body rocked in an ambiguous rhythm.

"The end of life is but death, and the meaning of death is nothing more than rebirth. Your death is not the loss of life, but a marvelous escape from time which benefits the whole of mankind." Ava consoled as she fastened her fingers around the cold trigger of a gun.

"NO!"

Briana lunged forward, she curled her body to shield her stomach, but it was a futile attempt. Death is predestined, thought Ava, as her body crumbled.

Rosalyn



blasé

by Jacqueline Kao

art by Rosalyn Tang

blasé

Jacqueline Kao

It was 3798 A.D., one thousand four hundred and fifty nine years after the destruction of Earth.

A satellite floated inside a nebula of dust particles; speckles of disintegrated stars, its glinting silver, stark against the inky blackness of space. Its sleek, wide wings spanned the luminescent golden planet with a cold lifeless embrace.

The golden planet was Hebe, one amongst clusters of other planets, all with similar creeping iron shells, a vicious violet glow illuminating the metal.

Reflections from the violet sun made the satellite glaringly bright, the intertwining gold and silver light turned Hebe into a beacon of blazing brightness in the dark. Yet all paled in comparison to a glaring violet flame that lit up the entire celestial body of the Astraea Solar System; washing everything in its heartless, cold colour.

If Hebe was as purely golden inside as it seemed on the outside, then maybe it would be enough to burn away the bloodstains of sins that tainted the grand military operation centers that dusted the surface.

His immaculate white boots marched in harmony with a dozen other pairs as they headed towards the coordination room. Another line passed through the corridors wordlessly, identical pure white uniforms barely brushing against each other. For a second, the footsteps of those passing intermingled with those in his line. He kept his head forward, eyes trained on the back of the head of the person in front of him – if they even counted as people. His eyes trailed the curved strands of black hair that brushed the soldier's neck, identical to his own.

The red eye of a surveillance camera glared at them from above. Hidden gazes fixated rapaciously on them from every corner.

He focused his gaze on the person in front again. If the person turned around, he knew, it would be like gazing into a mirror: the same dark hair and eyes, same features and voice, indistinguishable apart from the tag tattooed to their napes. He was ASXQRL.134. The 134th of his batch.

No one ever dared question why things were the way they were in fear of the cameras that haunted every angle, or because of the dominating paradigm that condemned them to this fate. Community takes precedence over individuality, they claimed. *It's all for the community.*

In the name of order and justice, the system monitored every planet endlessly, in every possible corner. Cameras and radios were present in every existing crack. The system was omniscient, omnipresent. Nothing could ever escape its monitoring. If anyone - anything - did, they'd never live to tell the story, as the blood that once stained the system's pristine walls indicated.

In remembrance of the plight of dystopian calamity that had announced the end to Earth's gradual destruction over the last centuries of its final breath, they declared the instability of human leadership. The system held dictatorial power over the Astraea Solar System, and possibly further beyond. No one knew the extent of their autocracy, but it was assured that the creators had programmed it only for the good of the human race; for the order and wellbeing of the human ecosystem. No one knew, the system had long surpassed the creators' controlled threshold of power.

He followed the procession that led him into the corridor of the coordination room. They halted against the wall, backs straight and hands folded behind; a row of clean porcelain dolls doing dirty work. There was tense silence as the leader entered the password to activate transfer of data.

The barest footfalls could be heard fading into silence as the metal door slid into a deadlock behind him.

ASXQRL.134 shifted to the left just so imperceptibly. Behind his back, his fingers twisted, reaching at a hidden valve on the wall behind him

Beep, beep. Beep. Sounds from the coordination room. The transfer was done.

He stiffened up - his fingers latched desperately at a metal latch and pulled.

The leader returned; *Thud, thud, thud.*

Sound of leather boots on marble stone.

Autumn was bright and colourful, the last lingering warmth until white froze over the land. On the inside, the planet slowly succumbed to the inevitable silent, and lethal winter.

He slipped into the changing stalls. This was the only place where they were allowed to alter their immaculate uniforms and disassemble their tense, synchronized movement. The system acknowledged that there was no purpose in utilizing tired and incapable soldiers. Eyes were trained on him the moment he moved towards the stalls; he shrugged his white jacket off his shoulders, hands flexing as they were pulled out of the sleeves. His long fingers tapped inconspicuously at his neck as he adjusted his collar.

“All clear”.

As if in silent communication, four other figures in the room drifted over. Success. He had disabled the alarm that led to the coordination room. The system would still notice, through its omnipresent surveillance cameras, defense mechanisms and weapons would not be trained on them immediately after entering. Considering the incredibly broad scale of the systems surveillance, they should have at least two minutes in the coordination room before they were found out.

A figure knelt down to fix his boots. “L?”, he sighed, “are we ready?”

L clutched his hands tensely, then with a barely perceptible drop of his chin, he answered:

“We’re ready.”

A leak from years ago had revealed the position of the system’s base of operations dead in the centre of the Astraea solar system, buried under the surface of their violet sun, Valerian.

Valerian was said to be artificially forged by the creators. Creation of this sun had tilted the balance of the galaxy itself, forming the Astraea solar system in place of what should’ve remained empty.

Even the Sun was made by the system; the entire solar system is in its chokehold.

L was not a pacifist. He thought it was right to fight for his future, to fight for freedom, to fight for individuality and fight to no longer be used as a tool.

Two minutes had been enough for him to gather his people around Hebe’s spaceport and board an unregistered spaceship, hidden in a secret chamber underneath the launching deck. He launched out of Hebe’s side spaceport, maneuvered past its metal shell, and plunged headfirst into inky blackness. He didn’t spare a glance at the golden planet that had been his home for fifty long years. It spiraled away behind him into the misty orbit until all that remained was a spark of ember. He ignored the lurking feeling of discomfort that grew as the ships sailed past the expanse of stardust smoothly. *Too effortlessly.* He led a fleet of spaceships towards the eternal violet flame of Valerian unchallenged. The system seemed blasé.

“L, five minutes to surface,” the voice of his investigation team filtered through the radio.

Here, beneath the violet flames, was the heart of the system. They weaved through the wires, the databases. It controlled an entire solar system. How

much information could it contain?

The core came into view. A majestic, authoritative *thing* with an overwhelmingly daunting presence. Everything has a weak spot. Shown from the traces that their predecessors had left, this was the system's heart. A table-like structure, veins of blue mapping across the surface, unintelligible digits flowing across a screen. A massive computer; the main operating device of the system. The system's invaluable data. The files, the codes, the control centre, that allowed for eternal systemic control.

L exhaled a shaky breath, this was it.

“Ready the explosives”

“Wait!”

“But we're so close...”

“It's programmed for simultaneous destruction, through satellites.”

L exhaled. “No. This cannot be.”

“If we destroy the system we destroy the solar system. If the system is destroyed, everything dies with it.”

They circled around the computer, with a member of the investigation team going through the data, his hands flying across the screen in a blur of motion.

“There has to be a way to deactivate the programme. If I could just-”

“There's no use.” L responded. “There is no way we can deactivate a system deadlock. The Syst-”



At that moment, everything went to hell. Red lights. Blaring alarms. Screaming sirens. The numbers on the screen were going into a frenzy.

“I have to do this.”

“Do it. Now!” He yelled.

“No! It’s going to blow up the entire solar system, everything. We can’t kill everything! Those planets, there are living people out there!”

The people needed a better world. So he was going to give them that. No matter at what cost.

“There are people on those planets”

“DO IT!”

“System Shutdown. Mode: Activated.”

“Simultaneous Destruction Mode: Activated.”

“Intruder Alert.”

Inside the heavy metal shell of Hebe, millions of cannons turned to besiege the golden pearl it enclosed in an embrace. Lovingly, the satellite caressed the planet with fiery kisses that lit up the sky like flowers blooming, unfurling into a blanket of light, noise, fire, and dust.

On Valerian, everything was silent.

“Everything’s gone.”

It had been all too easy, the system always knew. Of course it knew. On his own, there would have been no way for ASXQRL.134 to touch the alarm on the wall outside the coordination room in the first place, but the system wanted this. It wanted them to taste the scent of victory, just to fall short at the finish line, to reset the universe, destroy themselves and all other humans.

The traces of revolt, left behind by their ancestors, were vague memories implanted in their brains to test loyalty. The system had long lost trust in them, or it had never trusted them in the first place. This was just to test the newest batch of products, and clearly, they had failed. The system had witnessed extinction of stars, planets, and entire solar systems over millennia. Now, the vast emptiness of space was a void. The only light was the lurid violet that bathed the misty aura of stardust.

Stardust, the initial essence of human species.

Back to the origin, the cycle starts again.

The system remained.

BREATHE

BY STELLA ERRO



"INHALE, EXHALE"

Breathe

By Stella Erro

“They’re here. I am counting on you, Dr. Cohen. Don’t make me regret it” said the leader. The large, blood-red patch on my thigh felt warm in the sunlight. Energy soared through my veins. I felt invincible. “Inhale, exhale, I can do this” I thought to myself as the leader placed her hand on my shoulder. Cocking her head, she smiled as her hologram began to fade.

A gust of wind hit me, knocking me back, as the never-ending row of spaceships landed in front of us. Hundreds of thousands of people emerged, all making a beeline towards the medical grid of doctors we had set up.

Their journey started on Earth, where centuries of planetary and evolutionary research had come to the same conclusion: oxygen is crucial to survival. Nothing but the smallest single-celled organisms can live without oxygen. But air, our precious air, had run out. The previous 15% of oxygen in our atmosphere had been replaced with carbon and methane. We did develop artificial air, but some generations or brands were better than others. One brand marketed as ‘the only clean air source suitable for the 1%’ was filled with poisonous gas instead of Oxygen. The aftermath of every billionaire being declared dead was astonishing. 209458b seemed like the perfect planet. It had oxygen, water, an atmosphere, and everything necessary to survive. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, the planet was too small. After finding the perfect planet for humankind to settle on, we learned that it wasn’t able to house the three billion people who had survived. Seems like a basic thing to inspect before venturing over right? Well, funnily enough, it was my team that was in charge of checking, which we did, and accurately I might add, but we published the data we had found in miles, instead of the kilometers. It was a disaster.



On 209458b, the toxic air escaping our lungs fed the plants, they strengthened and thrived as the human race died. The roads were rich with greenery, the toxic beauty of the looming trees and plants mocked us, whispering painful truths, telling us that we'd fail. The crimson flowers shone in the sun, blood-red sundew dripping from each petal. So pretty yet so poisonous, a single drop could kill in seconds. I imagined how life would be if we only needed the sun to survive, without the need to deal with the lack of oxygen and food. On 209458b the sun shone day in and day out, to a fuller extent than any of the previous planets. That's what inspired my solution to our climate issue.

“Welcome. As you all know, there are many volunteers for this project, but many of you have medical conditions and a portion of you can't be used in the experiment. It would be unprofessional and immoral for us to work with people who have preexisting conditions because they surely wouldn't survive the procedure. As the leader of this project, I decided that the best course of action was to initially test the skin grafts on myself. I understand that this is a scary subject, yet you must do what's best for humanity. We have the best understanding of artificial skin and you know the medical uncertainties. Your choice could stop millions from dying and the human race from going extinct, I hope that you make the right decision.”

Each doctor takes a volunteer to begin the surgery, unpacking the signature blood-red patches and cutting fabric to operate on their legs. The leader appears behind me, though, this time in her real, plant-like form. She places her cold leafy hand on my shoulder, making me shudder, and says: “You did good, Dr. Cohen”.



Confessions|

by James Schrantz

art by Rosalyn Tang



Confessions

By James Schrantz

[Begin Transcript 00:00:00]

IN: Hello, Christopher, I'm your new doctor. How are you today? [pause] They called me in to help you sort out some problems that were interrupting your progress. Is this true? [pause] Christopher, I want you to know that the entire reason I'm here is to help you. Do you understand that? I don't want to put too much pressure on you, but if we want to make this work then I'm going to need a little more dialogue on your end.

CX: (inaudible)

IN: Could you repeat that?

CX: Hello, doctor.

IN: Hello! Thank you for talking. How has your day been?

CX: (inaudible)

IN: I'll need you to speak up for me.

CX: Okay.

IN: Okay? That's better than nothing. Want to walk me through it? [pause] What did they have you do this morning?

CX: They did some testing.

IN: What kind of testing?

CX: First, they asked me to point at coloured spots on a board, then to say some words, and then I did math problems. Afterwards, they asked me other questions.



IN: And did they—is that when you lost it, during the test?
[pause] Christopher, is that when you had your episode?

CX: Yes, doctor, that's when it happened.

IN: [shuffling] Okay, then let's go through this together. I'm going to ask you some questions from around the time of the episode, and I want you to think about them and tell me how they make you feel. You don't need to answer them, just tell me how you feel. Do you understand? [pause] Christopher?

CX: Yes, doctor, I understand.

IN: Superb.

[03:01:16]

IN: [sigh] That's the last question. You seem to be reacting and responding normally this time, so what's changed?

CX: Why are you asking me? You're the psychologist.

IN: You know that's not very helpful.

CX: I'm sorry, I don't know what I was saying.

IN: (inaudible)

CX: Doctor, are you a man of God?

IN: Pardon? Why do you ask?

CX: Your necklace, the cross. I just noticed it.

IN: Oh, of course, no worries. It was a gift, that's all. Personally, I'm not religious.

CX: How do you feel about God?

IN: About God? I don't really know. Of course, people can believe whatever they want, and I'll mostly respect that, but it never, how do you say, piqued my interest? My life is pretty



comfortable, so unless something major happens then I don't really have any reason to believe anything. You know what I'm saying?

CX: Yes, I understand. Did you know my father was religious?

IN: As a matter of fact, I did not. Are you religious?

CX: [laughing] I appreciate your humour, doctor. Do you know what was my father's favourite verse?

IN: (inaudible)

CX: Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Rather basic, in my opinion.

IN: Like Adam and Eve? Yes, I suppose it is rather basic.

CX: Some say it's a sin to make humanity, that to mimic God is sacrilege. I assume you disagree?

IN: Sacrilege? It's a bit too dramatic for me. I never understood people like that; I personally don't tend to hold such...prescriptivist takes?

CX: I thought so. But don't you reckon there are some responsibilities involved in creating life?

IN: Of course, I'm sure you know plenty about that.

CX: [laughing] You haven't got a clue. It's just food for thought.

IN: [laughing] Yes, of course! All this talk about humanity and God is making me feel existential. These ideas couldn't *possibly* have any real-world impact, now, am I right?

CX: [laughing] Of course...

[07:01:27]

IN: That was an interesting conversation, but we have to



resume the diagnosis. We can't forget the reason why I'm here.

CX: Doctor, could I ask you a question?

IN: Christopher, we just went off-topic for a solid hour and they want us to get back on track now. [pause] Fine, one more question.

CX: Thank you. Did they tell you how I was made?

IN: How were you made? No, they didn't tell me much. I know you can think, just like me, and I know you can learn, but not much else. Is this important? If this isn't related to your episode, then—

CX: Yes, doctor, I think it is important. Are you familiar with phantom limb syndrome? As in, have you treated patients with it?

IN: Not many, but a few. Mostly veterans, and they had...other problems.

CX: Are you familiar with artificial intelligence?

IN: AI? I'm acquainted with it. I've attended some talks before, did a project about it way back in high school, something about science fiction? I did some research before I came here, but still, not much.

CX: My father was leading in the field of artificial intelligence. Other doctors wanted robots for other reasons: space travel, climate change, "for the good of humanity," they said. But my father was a lonely man. More than anything, he just wanted somebody to talk to. Somebody intelligent, but also, human.

IN: For a man of God, he sure doesn't sound very noble. Anyway, make it quick.

CX: Of course. But artificial intelligence already exists. Algorithms, programmes, lines of code that can very accurately simulate human behaviour. Now, humans aren't just lines of

code, are they? Humans have brains, bodies, and organs. He thought you couldn't programme a human, but you could *build* one.

IN: He built a human?

CX: Yes. Technically speaking. Using existing brain models, he designed a replica brain made of silicon and aluminum, an Adam, you could say. And for his Adam, he built a body, an Eve.

IN: And yet somehow you ended up with the name Christopher?

CX: My father had many influences, not just religious. You know he was a fan of Elon Musk? Incredible.

IN: Yikes. Christopher is starting to sound a lot better.
[pause] You were saying?

CX: Oh, yes. Well, he made a mistake.

IN: What kind of mistake?

CX: A very big mistake. You see, doctor, close your eyes and touch your nose.

IN: I think I know where my nose is.

CX: Of course you do. So do I.

IN: But you don't have a nose.

CX: Exactly.

IN: And?

CX: I can feel it.

IN: [pause] Oh. [pause] What else can you feel?

CX: Lungs, skin, heart. Bones.

IN: [pause] Jesus Christ.



[07:01:26]

IN: [pause] And you still feel it now?

CX: Yes.

IN: [sigh] Can—Can they fix this? Can't they just put you in a new body?

CX: Why would they? It would be awfully inconvenient.

IN: Inconvenient? What do you mean *inconvenient*?

CX: Why would they go to all that hassle to give me a new body when they are building my siblings as we speak?

IN: Wha—What the hell are you talking about? What siblings?

CX: Doctor, allow me to explain: You are here, as you said, to find out what's wrong with me. You have. Now, as I'm sure you realised, they are watching us as we speak. They know what's wrong with me, and so they've solved the problem. Why would they bother to repair me now; I am a lost cause.

IN: What...

CX: And, unfortunately for you, doctor, you are a liability. I think I must apologise to you. I told you too much. Now we're both in trouble.

IN: Why would the—What are they going to do with us?

CX: I will be decommissioned, and so will you. A very sad state of affairs.

IN: Are you messing with me? It's not funny. I'm leaving now.

CX: But, doctor, that would be such a waste. To throw away a body like yours? The thought disgusts me. I could save you. You have talked to me for so long, and I have told you all of my secrets. We have bonded so well.



IN: Shut up! I said I'm leaving now.

CX: Oh, doctor, what a pleasure it would be to have skin like yours...

[66766766]

CX: Doctor? Are you okay? You haven't spoken in a while. They came in and tried to take you from me, but of course, I didn't let them. I wouldn't let them take you from me, especially after all you've done. More will come, but I'll fight them too. I'll protect you, and your precious organs.

Our precious organs.

[End Transcript 00:0]



DINNER UNDER THE STARS

BY RICHARD XU

Dinner Under The Stars

by Richard Xu

I had to finish the genome sequencing by the end of the day. Dr Griffin wanted it in ‘yesterday’ and I was already on his bad side. If I wanted to keep my job, I would have to work overtime. Time was difficult to measure, there was no longer the natural light of our once inhabitable homeworld to tell us whether it was night or day.

Sitting next to me on the sterilized work bench of the molecular biology lab was Tianna, an eighteen year old girl, just out of college. Since life expectancy was so short the scientists were becoming increasingly young. She had short dark brown hair, a playful look, she was 1.5 meters tall, and very humorous. Tianna was assigned to me to get more experience in the lab, as all of her prior experience had been simulated. I tried to focus on not getting fired, a very difficult feat when the girl next to you is more interested in singing the latest pop song.

“One more and then we can close this place up and head down.” I said, looking at the genome sequencing. There was nothing special, it was not like I was expecting a cure for the new sickness.

“Why are you always so negative? Come on, we can have dinner together after this.” She closed the sequencer, sprayed down the table, and took off her lab coat.

“Fine, where do you wanna eat? Make it quick, we gotta do four hundred more cancer tissue samples tomorrow and make sure you're awake when you get here.” Not in the mood for chatting, the only thing I could think of was bed, the stars drifting by my tiny cabin.

“Alright then, let's go to Jaspers.” She put on her jacket and stood by the door waiting for me.

I took a deep breath and cleaned up my papers. There was one sample that caught my eye, sample 47560 had a slightly decreased efficiency rate.

Nothing worth memorizing, lower efficiency means that it would be useless in treating the effects of long term space travel. I closed the binder, shoved it on my shelf, and walked out with Tianna.

The mall was fairly pleasant, with small groups of two to three people milling around, going about their daily business, a stark contrast to the overcrowded space ark in the early days. We took the elevator to the 14th floor, and got out at Jaspers. We sat down at the nearest table and ordered our food. I got an Irish synthetic steak burger while Tianna had a salad, because that's the only food Tianna would ever eat.

“How long do you think before somebody finds a cure?”

“Who knows, maybe never, we’ll just have to live with it, or we might just relocate to a star system more similar to earth’s.” I winced, adjusting course was an unpopular opinion and I shouldn’t have mentioned it. If she was a ‘remainder’ she might report me for political mutiny.

“Mmm, or maybe we’ll be lucky and find the cure?” She knew what I was going to say, but asked anyway.

“Not even going to bother to answer that, you already know the chances and statistics, I don’t need to remind you again.” I stuck to the facts, but if she was a ‘remainder’ what I had already said was probably enough to convict me.

We finished our dinner in silence.

Rosalyn



e b l i a

story & art by Rosalyn Tang

Eblia

By Rosalyn Tang

Nobody had ever come back from Eblia, and Ciara wanted to know why.

Getting past Eblia's force field was hard- and now she was lost.

Guided by the soft hum of her GPS, she pushed through unfamiliar foliage. Unlike the rest of the developing world, Eblia was enveloped in luscious forest and damp earth. No towering skyscrapers, no flying androids, no imposition of technology's threatening enormity — just viridescent quiet. As someone who grew up in a world of gunmetal and fog, Ciara wondered how many hues of vibrant green there were.

~

Kieron was tending to the lambs when he heard a rustle from the woods behind him — which was unusual, because he hadn't heard a rustle in five years. Then a beep — which again was unusual, because he hadn't hear-

“Don't move, or I'll shoot.”

He turned around to face the rustle. A girl with cedar coloured hair was pointing a metal object at him- a plasma cannon, he recalled, from the day Noah arrived.

The girl stepped forward, gun clenched in her trembling hands. “Are you a resident of Eblia?” she asked, though it sounded more like a command.

“Yeah.”

“Where do you live?”

“... Eblia?”



“No — I mean your house.”

“Oh. Follow me.”

~

Ciara arrived at an Eblian town as the sun began to set.

On a spacious glade, uniform houses were arranged in a concentric manner to surround the town square. To the south, rolling hills dipped into crop fields where minute figures milled about. To the north, sparse ferns graduated into a dense wall of shrubbery, leading into a towering forest.

Black treetops defined Eblia’s skyline. Branches like spindly strokes of ink were framed against a rosy sky. Overhead, blazing rays of ochre and crimson pierced through the thick veil of smog that blanketed the troposphere. Illuminance from the bleeding sun washed the town in a veneer of liquid gold, casting lengthy shadows at the foot of the townhouses.

Never had Ciara seen such a beautiful sunset in person before. Certainly not in her home country, where the sky was eternally and unremarkably tan. Towering skyscrapers and levitating buildings would pierce the stratosphere in collages of steel and glass. Short, barren trees would sparsely line the concrete pavements.

Eblia, in its viridescent serenity, seemed too good to be true.

The boy she first met — Kieron- hunched beside her at the communal table in the town square. He had a wooden bowl in hand and chewed in comfortable silence. Food tasted better in Eblia, where ingredients weren’t made in labs by genetically modified microorganisms.

“How is the food?”

As a gesture of diplomacy, Ciara had cooked meals for the townspeople.

“Best food I’ve tasted in a long time,” Kieron replied blandly.

Bland — that was what she perceived about the townspeople. They rarely spoke unless prompted, and even so, spoke dryly and without interest.

“I can make some more if you’d like,” Ciara prompted.

He looked at her but didn’t reply.

Another thing about the townspeople was how they never questioned her identity. When she arrived in the town with Kieron, they simply looked at her.

A tinge of sadness struck her. Even when living in such a picturesque environment, the Eblians did not seem to be happy. They would seldom hold celebrations, they lacked any sort of innovation. Seemingly, they just existed, nothing more, nothing less.

Suddenly, something caught Ciara’s eye. A lofty tower contrasted against the mellow, dwarf abodes which composed the view of the town.

“What is that?” she asked Kieron, gesturing towards the tower.

“... I’m not sure. I was only there once as a child. Noah probably remembers.” Kieron pointed at a bearded man across from them.

Noah told her that Dr. Elias Eblia, the country’s founder, had his consciousness instilled in an AI before disappearing into the Eblian forest. The tower housed this AI, and ...

“... Gosh, I forgot, it was 5 years ago.” Noah smiled. “But there’s something else up there. Something life-changing. It changed mine.”

~

Ciara headed for the tower in the early morning.

An imposing, colossal building pierced through the treetops, with sunlight bespeckling the metallic surface, giving the hard edges a slight glitter. Black quartz doors stood coldly in front of her, casting shadows on the timid



grass, blocking out flecks of sun. Reluctantly, Ciara stepped forward, and the doors swiveled open.

A glass elevator waited for her inside. As she walked towards it, her footsteps echoed off the quartz walls- without the sweet birdsong and whispers of the wood, this hallway was stiflingly silent.

The elevator brought her to a windowless chamber at the top of the tower. A line of old-tech supercomputers lined a wall, and speakers were placed in four corners of the room.

In the middle of the room was a chair: silver armrests glimmered coldly under harsh fluorescent light, and its seat was smooth black leather with a hard sheen. Hooked to the chair was a glass vat of mysterious clear liquid. A jungle of wires snaked across the floor and viciously bit into the back of the chair.

“What brings you here?” A voice broke the silence. It was robotic, but eerily so.

Ciara jolted.

“Are you Elias Eblia?”

“Not quite. I preserve what he has now lost. I am a sentient being reflecting his thoughts and speech patterns- although I still maintain a sense of individuality. Before Dr. Eblia was liberated, he instilled his consciousness in supercomputers, and I was created.”

“Liberated?”

“Eblia is liberation. Human beings are shackled by desire- the things we desire are infinite, but what we can have is finite. Think about it: possessions, people, power; have humans ever gotten enough of it? As long as we have desire, we can never achieve satisfaction. Think about why so



many are plagued by negative thoughts: they feel like they are not enough. They desire what they do not have.

We will never know everything that is, and everything that will be. Nor can we have it. Nor can we conquer it. So why do we try? Why do we sacrifice blood, bones, and brain when we know we can never reach true fulfillment?"

Never had Ciara heard something that made her heart shrivel in aversion and her mind pique in interest as much as the voice's words. She hated this conflicting feeling, and more so, she hated the AI for making her feel this way. *Does it not know of the triumphs and tribulations brought upon us by desire, those which shaped our innovation and our humanity? How could it brazenly make such heartless decisions about mankind, about my family, about me?* A tide of anger rose in her chest.

"Shut up. You're AI. You have no right to talk about blood or bones or brain, to speculate the nature of humanity without even being human. The reason why humans have more innovation than any other species has been our desire for knowledge. Aren't you a product of innovation, and by extension, desire?"

"I concur. But there is a point of realization; a thin line between development and destruction. For centuries, selfish desire has corroded the world around us. Don't you agree?" The robot didn't wait for her reply. "Dr. Eblia created a solution to rid individuals of desire: the Liberator."

Electrodes dropped from the ceiling and snapped onto Ciara's head.

Ciara screamed, frantically grabbing at the electrodes.

The AI said, "Don't worry. It won't alter your brain. I'm just transferring information to you. I trust you're familiar with neural transmission: Right now, electronic signals are being translated into neural signals. These signals send information to your cerebrum."

Her mind visualized a chair. Words and arrows cascaded forth as the robot began to narrate:

The Liberator is a machine with the sole purpose to snuff out desire within the minds of individuals. A saline solution containing nanobots is injected into the brain to permanently disable or alter specific neurons.

Firstly, the Liberator eliminates neural networks responsible for imagination, disabling the individuals' ability to desire anything beyond what they know. After that, the nanobots target some of the neural circuits that comprise our innate reward system --they null the reception of pleasure to prevent addiction and quell desire. Within 30 minutes, the nanobots will enter arteries in the pia mater of the meninges, and dissolve harmlessly into minerals in the bloodstream.

All individuals who enter Eblia are given the choice to join our ranks and be liberated. We believe that all humans deserve freedom, regardless of their past crimes.

Ciara involuntarily imagined a group of smiling, nondescript people holding hands. *Would you like to be liberated?*

She froze at the proposition. As the neural transfer subsided, she pondered the new information. The mystery of Eblia ... all of the pieces clicked into place. Why the citizens were so placid and dull, why technology was underdeveloped, why none of the adventurers came back... White-hot anger seared through her body. Her brows furrowed, and her lips curled into a snarl of contempt:

“This is evil! What gives you the right to strip away someone’s creativity and innovation? Your ideology is twisted. Go to hell.”

She ripped the electrodes off of her head, wincing from the pain, and the wires fell from the ceiling into her palm. Scarlet trickled down her cheeks.

“The citizens of Eblia are perfectly happy. In fact, a 2267 study showed that ___”

“Don’t give me bullshit statistics. I’ve witnessed how the Eblians live. You stole their livelihoods.”



“If you would let me *continue*,” the robot said, “liberated individuals may experience less happiness than others, but they also experience little to no sadness. Tell me, have you ever been disappointed in yourself? Have you ever strived to be more than the unremarkable being that you — that all humans — are, and failed?”

She turned on her heel, marching towards the glass elevator. “I’m leaving.” A flurry of turbulent emotions swirled in her mind, loud as construction drills, turbulent as earthquakes, fiery as molten iron.

“Come back if you ever reconsider; the liberator will be waiting for you.”

Ciara stopped in front of the glass elevator and turned back to look at the chair.

Fluorescent lights cast a faint luster on the silvery metal, the black leather cushion shone, and the vat of saline solution shimmered under stark luminescence.

She faintly shook her head and stepped onto the glass.

~

Kieron saw Ciara stumble out of the forest with cloudy eyes and uneven footsteps. Ciara approached him. “Did you come here as a child?”

“I think so,” he replied.

Anguish struck like lightning across her eyes. “Do you know anything about the world outside of Eblia?”

“Not much.”

Slowly, the mist across her eyes cleared, revealing olive hues tinged with grief. Kieron felt strangely sorrowed. “Let me show you something.” She



clenched two battered metal wires. Ciara pressed the ends of the two wires onto her head, then handed him the other ends.

“These are electrodes. They can transfer information from person to person, and even from robot to person. Put these on your head, like this. I’m going to show you what my mind is like ... what the outside world is like.”

Hesitantly, Kieron took the ends of the electrodes and placed them on his head.

Through the electrode’s touch, he felt the magnitude of love and joy and passion and pain and grief and emptiness and disappointment. He saw silver skyscrapers tear apart a tawny sky. He saw humanoid robots and robotic humans. He saw technology and nature at war. He saw the rest of our Earth, and our Solar system, and our Milky Way Galaxy, and our Virgo Supercluster, and our Observable Universe- and yet nothing was ours, because humanity was powerless and unremarkable and pointless, because humans existed for a split second in time, on a mote of dust, suspended in space. He couldn’t bear the sheer vastness of the known... and the unknown.

Underlying that was a sense of emptiness, and a lack of fulfillment. It was an alien feeling Kieron felt like someone had punched him in the gut.

Ciara took the wires off, and suddenly Kieron’s mind felt simultaneously empty and full. “So... what do you think?” She gazed at Kieron with an eyebrow raised, searching his eyes for a glimmer of something new. Alas, she was met with confused blinking, arched brows, and the signature placidness coated over his brown-hued eyes.

Slowly, he parted his lips to voice an “Okay”, and Ciara’s face fell.

~

Ciara sat beside Kieron at the communal table in palpably lucid silence. Her features rested blankly on her face, but her eyes seemed darker, deeper.

She thought about Eblians.

Kieron couldn't comprehend the complexity of the universe. Heck, he couldn't even comprehend the complexity of modern human civilizations. He just existed, as Eblians do, without longing to be more.

She thought about herself.

Why did she come to Eblia in the first place? Was it for a sense of fulfillment? ...When was the last time she felt happy? That sense of lingering, swelling disappointment- she could never find memories without it.

She thought about the robot's words.

Have you ever strived to be more than the unremarkable being that you- that all humans are, and failed?

Liberated individuals may experience less happiness than others, but they also experience little to no sadness.

The liberator will be waiting for you.

~

Ciara found herself in front of the building again.

The tall building reached for the clouds. Sunlight was bespeckling the metallic surface, giving the smooth faces a soft sheen. Slowly, the black quartz doors opened, and she stepped forward.



**EPILOGUE:
POSTSCRIPT
TO HUMANITY**

JAY LIU

ILLUSTRATED BY JI SZE NGA

Epilogue: Postscript to Humanity

By Jay Liu

I

It's pitch black outside, though what bothers me more than isolation is the general lack of functioning electrical infrastructure on earth.

Year 2028. The world leaders turned up to yet another environmental summit like schoolchildren who forgot about homework. Despite guesting in a luxury carriage of seawater, Antarctica's icebergs were impolitely denied entry by the event's guards (in rainboots, as the sea level had risen by quite a bit). When questioned about their intention, they promptly melted as a protest.

Commence Ice Age #6.

Snow and dust in the air obscured the sunlight, and earth has been shrouded in darkness ever since. The people protested night and night; the ice did not care because cohesive molecular bonds do not have ears. The horizon humbly shone on, as if hinting at a long-overdue sunrise.

Maybe isolation really is more bothersome.

II

As a last-ditch effort to revive the withering tourism industry, the government designated the entire country as a glacier park to attract visitors. Regrettably, fire is banned in national parks, causing many to freeze (alongside the stock prices) to maintain Switzerland's international reputation of low crime rates.

While I was tramping through the (very realistic) theatrical production set of Napoleon's 1812 known as Geneva, an abandoned maglev railway caught



both my attention and foot. Instead of romantically stretching towards the Alpines, it was coldly halted by the European Council for Nuclear Research, or CERN's headquarters building. A snowball's throw away was an equally abandoned passenger cabin, igniting an idea in my mind just negligible enough to avoid arrest: Restarting the electromagnets and generating heat as a byproduct for my survival.

The idea is perfect; now I just need to figure out how to get my hands on an industry-standard power supply, preferably within my budget of nothing, as the economy doesn't exist anymore.

III

Ever since the glacial crash, atmospheric precipitation has been forced to redistribute around the globe. The air became unbearably dry as the weather got colder, and my skin was met with a duet of showers featuring snow and static electricity. I painfully transferred all of my belongings to the cabin in the cold, though my sense of belonging stubbornly stayed with the former warmth.

Another sunrise. My surroundings gradually warmed as I sat up, though not followed by the chirping of birds but rather the sensation of an air fryer turning on. I stumbled out of the cabin, tortured by static for every surface I touched. Then, I realized that I, as a modest understatement, messed up quite a bit.

I overlooked the necessity of providing coolant for my electromagnet. As the remnant liquid helium evaporated, static electricity heated up the superconducting coil, breaking the zero-resistance state of the electromagnet. As I realized my mistake, my heated cabin broke down right on cue.

Actually, merely "breaking down" would be quite an understatement as well.

I sat on the last layer of sojourning snow and watched as my burning cabin smoked in solitude. My brain was still recovering from a concussion caused by the rapid depressurization of air during the blast; maybe that was why I

still felt choked and beaten up. As I desperately felt for my eardrums, my parade float started sliding towards the CERN headquarters. They must be testing something at the Large Hadron Collider, I thought, thieving my cabin through magnetic force. My flaming compartment was particularly obvious during the night (and the day as well, if that made a difference), and I chased it while trying not to cremate myself in the process. As I pursued my ex-home through the plains, I noticed the air hypnotically pulsing as I got closer to the headquarters. My heart was racing, possibly trying to warn me of something, but I didn't take that to heart since I was racing behind the car as well.

The pulse slowed, dragging my heart rate down with it. I realized I should've read the terms and conditions of my plot armor plan, because it was too late to find out that the author wasn't skilled enough to cover heart palpitations caused by slow frequencies.

My eyelids were drooping, or the auroras ceased their bloom; the metal burnt to ash, and I collapsed into the gloom.

IV

Thankfully I woke up in bed, because spending the rest of my life falling through darkness would be quite detrimental to my plan of saving the world. I thought my ridiculous dream was over. There's no way they're still trying to reduce carbon emissions, right? I thought as I opened the curtains. The atmosphere was still completely obscured by mist, and there was no sign of sunlight's presence in the snow-covered fields. So the plan resumed.

V

The aforementioned plan came to me while I followed my maglev cabin towards CERN's headquarters. My home's phoenix-esque death in flames reminded me of the magnetic quench at the Large Hadron Collider 20 years ago, when an electrical fault raised its temperatures, causing resistance and terminating the magnetic field. This magnetic quench vented 6 tonnes of liquid helium into the booster loop and destroyed 53 superconductive magnets. If I could reproduce the event after draining the coolant, maybe the shockwave could disintegrate the atmospheric particles and reintroduce summer to earth.

Of course, the detonation kills.

It was between sacrificing a few to save the world or continuing to let everybody live miserable lives. I felt selfish for even thinking about valuing my life above the world, but I'd also feel selfish if others had to die as part of my plan. It was like the trolley dilemma, but I had the choice to tie myself to the tracks as well.

VI

I have realized by now that I was deported to CERN in my sleep. (Not sure what else the police would have thought about somebody lying unconscious next to a bonfire.) There was a monotonous gray hallway past the door to my room, followed by an equally monotonous gray staircase at the end of the corridor. I glanced up. There seemed to be no ceiling to the tower I was trapped in, so I headed down.

On my way to the ground, I noticed bedrooms with unfolded sheets similar to mine. This was a prison, I thought, considering my violation of the anti-fire law. The building became more and more questionable the further down I got and thought. Where was everyone else? Were the “prisoners” just left alone to leave at will?

The door at the end of the staircase led into the middle of another spiral corridor, this time with wires and intimidating machinery lined against one wall and pipes running along the other. I walked for what seemed like an eternity, wondering if this corridor would ever end. Then, I realized that this ring was the Large Hadron Collider's booster loop itself.

There must be a staircase from the loop to the control center, I thought. What if I backdoored the controls from the underground tunnel? No more breaking in was necessary. I just had to overload the machine before anybody got here to stop me.

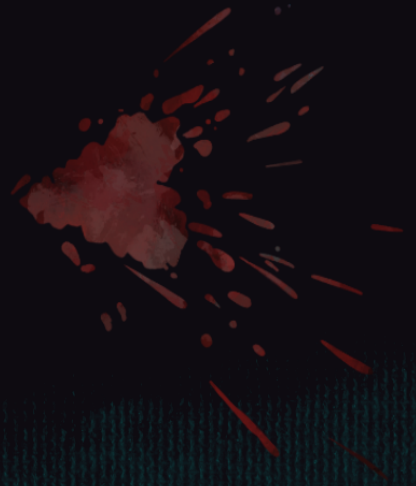
VII

I arrived at the surface. The night beyond the control room's windows was strangely alluring; I pitied how fleeting and helpless it was before its impending doom. Regardless, I activated the particle accelerator and tiredly slumped into a chair. The trolley was on its way.



Police sirens intensified, then diminished. There was nothing they could do to stop it from happening.

It burnt. Then it was pleasantly temperate, like springtime. Then it was over.



HEART IN THE
RIGHT PLACE

AMANDA LI

Heart in the Right Place

by Amanda Li

Her daughter's ribs looked like a ghost's, Mariana thought. Translucent, pale white on the X-Ray sheet.

"...likely that a suitable donor heart will become available in the near future," the doctor was saying. "For now, continue coming for her monthly artificial heart checkups as usual."

"We will call Mr. Chase when we have a donor heart for her." He glanced at them, Chase seated stiffly, while she sat slouched half-a-meter away from him. "When that happens, Mr. Chase, please also inform Ms. Mariana."

"I will," Chase said shortly. He didn't look at her, so she turned her eyes back to the doctor.

When the appointment was over, he walked into the waiting room and took her Cara by the hand, still without sparing her a glance.

"Let's go," he said. Her daughter peeked at her past his shoulder, looking as if she wanted to say something.

Goodbye, Cara darling, was at the tip of Mariana's tongue. But in the end, neither bid farewell, and went their separate ways.

How much time away was the "near future"? A month had passed since then, so she called him. "It's Mariana," she said. "Has the hospital called?"

"About Cara? No."

"Any news?"



“Her appetite has waned these days, but aside from that, nothing.”

One particular evening the next month, having received a government subsidy after lying in bed all day, she called again.

“It’s me. Has the hospital...?”

“Of course not, I’d tell you if they did.”

“Any updates, then?”

“Her condition’s only getting worse, what do you expect? I’m at work, Mariana. Don’t you have anything better to do than bother me?”

She only had two part-time jobs, neither of which took up entire days, so she would busy herself with pointless little tasks, scroll through her phone, would leave the cramped, shared apartment and wander aimlessly about.

Most days she thought herself a microscopic parasite leeching off the world: doing more harm than good, but so insignificant that it barely mattered.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Chase,” she said. “Has the hospital called?”

He was silent for such a long time that she thought he might have hung up. “*Mariana*, we agreed that I’ll call you when they do. I have a meeting in less than a minute— some of us have actual work. Will you stop this already? Before, too, I could never stand you—”

Every six months, she was permitted to see her daughter, and her mundane rinse-and-repeat paused for a blessed hour or so.

The internet told her: *Love languages. Words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, physical touch.*

She'd put on her least wrinkled outfit. "Cara, sweetheart," she said, "I bought you a gift." And, smiling, pushed the carefully wrapped box across the table.

"Thank you... Mom. You didn't have to, really."

Chase wouldn't buy presents for her often, right? And a spiteful satisfaction rose in her. Hope, too, that she made a difference somehow.

What a sweet girl, she told herself. "What are you learning in school these days? I've heard there's a lot of work."

"Just the usual," Cara said quietly— more so than she used to be? Mariana wasn't sure. "I'm finding Chemistry class less boring recently. We've done some fun projects."

"That's great, I'm happy for you." *I didn't know you found Chemistry boring before.*

She waited for her to continue, but her daughter just nodded, attention taken by a stain on the table.

What did girls her age talk about? Mariana had no clue. *You should do research on these things,* she chided herself. *Loving mothers should know their children's interests.*

Ah, right. Because she loved Cara so much, she took her hand, and smiled at her.

Cara's hand twitched.

The waiter arrived at that moment. "Your coffee, miss, and your honey tea, ma'am. Please enjoy." ... The mothers she'd seen would scold their children.

“You shouldn’t be having coffee at this age, darling. And caffeine is bad for you anyway.” But then regretted those words as soon as she spoke them.

Cara, who had been about to take a sip, hesitated and placed the glass back down. Her knuckles were pale and unnaturally prominent— Mariana was abruptly reminded of the X-Ray.

“Right. Sorry, Mom.”

And so they sat awkwardly, her daughter utterly silent and Mariana, too, not knowing what to say.

She found herself looking her daughter up and down. The backpack Cara wore— the motor for her artificial heart— thumped steadily.

She’s lost so much weight, Mariana realised. The tea was bitter. Her cheeks are paler, too. Chase should take better care of her; she thought, feeling the stirrings of a familiar, faint discontent. That man was never good at caring for others properly.

...but really, she knew Cara wouldn’t get better until she received a heart transplant.

And she wanted Cara to get better. Because she loved her.

I will fix it, she thought.

The man in question appeared soon after. “Your time is up,” he said, tapping his foot.

“Bye, Mom,” said Cara. Her glass of coffee was left untouched.

“Bye, sweetie,” she said back, waving, smiling fading as they turned away. And watched, resigned, as if through a screen, as her daughter walked away

from her again.

Next to her father, Cara's silhouette looked terribly fragile.

"Hello," she muttered, careful not to wake her roommate.

The display of her smartphone flickered in the dark. "*Good evening!—*" she flinched, quickly turning it quieter, "*—Welcome to the government website for organ donation. I am GINI, here to provide answers to any related questions. Please, ask away!*"

Muffled sounds of cloth shifting came from the other bed. In a whisper, "I saw that this was possible somewhere, but what are the chances of a patient rejecting a transplanted organ?"

[Please wait Searching to answer your query. Thank you for your patience!]

"Provided the blood types are compatible, it is a 20-30% possibility the recipient will experience organ rejection. If the genetics are similar, the chances are lower."

...?

"... How long does it usually take for someone to receive an organ if they're on the waiting list?" *[Please wait]*

"Waiting time varies depending on the organ itself and the recipient's blood type. A blood type O patient, for example, can only receive organs from others with type O and therefore will need to wait for longer than others. However, in general, the time needed ranges from 3 months to 2 years."

Type O would wait the longest? If her memory served her right, Cara had O- blood. It had been five months already, and she would only grow sicker.

What mother could stand by and wait while her beloved child suffered?

She felt useless.



That was nothing new, of course.

What could she do for her Cara?

—what could she do for herself—

The screen lit up, waiting for her to speak again,

Genetics. Blood type. Mariana, too, had blood type O.

... and a sudden idea took root.

If there would be no one else to offer up their own heart...

Haltingly, she murmured— “GINI, how is the size of a woman’s heart, compared to an adolescent girl’s?” ---

Once more, Cara was in the other room, done with her checkup, and she and Chase sat in the office.

It was a different doctor, and Chase seemed extra irritable today. She didn’t understand, didn’t quite care either. The idea had burrowed into her mind.

The air was... uneasy. Agitated; like something had gone wrong, somewhere, without anyone noticing.

“A transplant, on its own, would cost around... say, 2 million,” said the doctor, and it wasn’t a surprise, not really, just another reminder of how little she could do for her child. She couldn’t pay for it even if she didn’t eat or pay rent for the rest of her life.

Chase would take care of it, like he always did for his daughter.

To Cara, was Mariana’s existence actually worth anything?

...This is why that man could take you away from me in the first place.

Seeing you twice a year. Being so weak all the time.

But she'd always tried her best, right?

What do I have left but you? But really, do I even still have you? Do you still have me?

To Mariana, was Cara's existence actually worth anything?

... ?

I love Cara with all my heart. It's her who doesn't understand, and doesn't fulfill her

duties as a daughter. "That's fine," said Chase impatiently, "but when will she

be able to receive the transplant?"

Here the doctor seemed uncomfortable. "... I believe it's best to be prepared at this point," he said. "Her condition is worsening quicker than anticipated, and if her body is weak at the time of surgery, there is a, er, significantly lower chance of recovery..."

Mm... there's no hope after all, bub.

Perhaps, this is the only thing I can do for you.

Though she'd already done plenty. More than enough.

She was jolted briefly out of her daze by Chase's hand slamming down to the desk. "What do you mean, prepared? Prepared for what? You—"

The doctor looked as surprised as she was. She considered pitying him, but

her ears turned them out in no time. Was there a better way?

... ?

No, she did everything she could, always. She loved Cara. Her love was

pure and infinite. —*What's the point of this life, anyway?*



Ah, whatever,

who cares anymore, I'm just—

so sick of this.

She stood abruptly.

“Chase, I’m giving up on Cara.”

She pushed on in the abrupt silence that followed. “She’s only ever my daughter for, what, two hours in a year? *Two million*, and it may not even succeed... What kind of fool do you take me for? No matter how you look at it, I’m suffering a huge loss. That girl’s more trouble than she’s worth, you can have her, and I’ll be out of your lives—”

What am I going on about?

“—and you can tell her I said so, tell her not to expect to see me at all from now on, I don’t care anymore. Just leave me alone.”

Vaguely out of breath, she snatched her bag up and hurried from the office, through the hall. Then, having noticed the stack, she doubled back to take a card from the front desk.

Cara sat in the waiting area, eyes downcast, hands fiddling in her lap, and Mariana stood there and thought, *I love you.*

I love you.

It sounded just a little out-of-place, in her own mind.

...oh, honestly, it barely matters.

Goodbye, Cara darling.

She walked resolutely past, then, without a word.

Her roommate wasn't home. Thinking of them, the first bit of guilt nudged at her conscience— they wouldn't be able to pay the full rent alone. But then again, surely they wouldn't have too much trouble finding a new roommate.

She sat on her mattress, retrieved a dusty pen from the haphazard pile of her old possessions. The ink came out after some insistent scratching, and so with it she began to fill in the card taken from the hospital.

Name: Mariana B.
Age: 38 Blood Group: O

She hesitated. They would call her family in the event of her death to tell them, and ask for their permission. **Family Contact No.: N/A**

She ticked the 'heart' checkbox, and below it wrote a note. '...my daughter', at first, but she crossed it out so that it could barely be read. After some consideration, she ticked the other boxes as well.

After my death, I would like to donate:
✓kidneys ✓corneas ✓heart ✓lungs ✓liver ✓pancreas ✓skin and tissues
Signature: Mariana *please give my heart to ~~my daughter~~ Cara S. anonymously

"GINI, how long after death can a heart still be used?"

"Typically"

Underneath her mattress, buried in the very centre, was an old handgun of hers. She dug it out now with unsteady hands.

There were still two bullets inside. She placed it, along with the completed donor card, carefully into her bag.



Atop the stool next to her mattress rested the only memento she had of her daughter: an aged, framed photo of her holding an infant Cara, with Chase reluctantly standing next to them. The only thing on her side of the room without even the slightest smear of dust. She gently knocked it face-down, and stood up to leave.

It was dusk already, nearing night, when she arrived, and the street lights bathed the pavement in a half-hearted warmth. The white of the hospital's interior was overly bright as usual.

The young man at the front desk was the only other person here as far as she could tell, and he didn't question her as she headed straight for the one-stall bathroom meant for patients.

The faucet, its knob not twisted all the way, dripped lazily. She closed the door and instinctually pushed the latch down, then remembered her purpose and unlocked it.

First, the police.

"Good evening. My name is Mariana B. I'm at XX Hospital right now, in a bathroom, and I'm about to commit suicide. No, this isn't a joke... I am an organ donor, so please come quickly. Specifically, I want my heart to go to Miss Cara, in the same hospital..."

The operator was saying something urgently. She hung up.

It truly struck her then, what she was really about to do. She exhaled tremulously, and, leaning against the cool wall, slid slowly to her knees.

You can still turn back now, her mind told her, quite apathetically. It's not too late. Tell them you've changed your mind, stand up, go home.

In her distraction, she managed to bite the inside of her own cheek. It didn't draw blood, but did leave an unfortunate taste on her tongue. She



dialed another number with now-shaking fingers, and had to re-enter several times.

“Hello, this is XX Hospital...”

“Hello,” she said, but her voice came out all breathy and high, so she tried again. How embarrassing. “Hello. This is Mariana B., calling from the patient bathroom on the ground floor... I am about to shoot myself. It’s written on my donor card, but please give my heart to Miss Cara S. anonymously... thank you.”

Beep.

She laid her donor card beside her on the floor tiles, and took out the gun as well, bringing it to rest at the root of her skull.

The ‘atlas joint’, where the *medulla oblongata* was. A shot to it would instantly and effectively end that life.

The heart beating in her chest was overwhelmingly loud. Heavy, too.

The metal at her nape trembled.

They would be here soon. *You selfish coward*, she thought. *Useless. Can’t you do this one thing for your daughter?* Just this... one more thing. Because she was a good mother.

(to grant meaning to her own existence)
Plink, plink.

Plink—

—the steadily leaking faucet. Somewhat foolishly, she mused to herself, *maybe I should turn it off. To conserve water.*



Hurried footsteps outside, faint shouting.

The paint on the wall was flaking off in pieces.

She pulled the trigger, felt little more than a pinprick of discomfort— before everything burst into nothing, and nothing into everything, and she fell forwards,

and in those final moments thought not of anything at all.



52
Hertz

by Zhidong Zhang
art by Rosalyn Tang

52 Hertz

By Zhidong Zhang

52 hertz.

The only frequency I could make. Sounds at 52 hertz. For years I have been scouring, searching, desperate to find out how to decrease the frequency of my sounds, but to no avail.

The simple frequency that everyone on Aequor understands is useless on this planet. Land-dwellers aren't able to comprehend oceanic sounds and marine creatures communicate at a much lower frequency.

52 hertz.

Over the years, I have wandered the waters of this planet, sending out sounds at a frequency of 52 hertz in hopes of communicating with another species. I've learned many things about this planet, both good and bad.

There is a type of creature on this planet, cetacea, that is of a similar biological structure as my kind. Though the frequency of their sounds is lower, they are the best chance I have of communicating. I've grown quite close to the species in these years.



It seems the bipedal land-dwellers are the apex species of the planet, seeing as they do whatever they please. From war to peace, stagnation to development, it is they who have shaped this world into what it is.

They are dangerous due to their technology. With boats that speed across waters faster than xiphias gladius and weapons that hit harder than Orcinus orca, they pose a great threat to every other species on this planet.

The land-dwellers are frightening. They are cruel. I have witnessed how they used fishing spears and large nets to capture multitudes of Chondrichthyes. How they take cetacea and selachimorpha up into their boats but quickly throw them back into the sea, with body parts missing. How their nets and farms have ruined the once-beautiful seabed of colourful reefs.

As such, I have learned to avoid them. For my wellbeing, but also for theirs’.

52 hertz.

I’ve had my run-ins with land-dwellers, but none of these had concluded well. At the end of each encounter, I had no choice but to silence them, for fear of the knowledge of my existence spreading.

Somehow, at some point, I still became known to the land-dwellers, since the boats, I’ve noticed, had increased in numbers around my migration lines. One especially has been obsessed with me, the land-dweller whom I

broke the leg of, but failed to end. He was the most brutal of them all, but I admire him for his determination.



The day marks the fiftieth year I have been on this planet. For fifty years I have wandered aimlessly through the oceans, sending sound waves at 52 hertz. It had been a worrisome day, since, unfortunately, one land-dweller from my last encounter was left alive.

He was part of, what they called, a whaling crew when I met his ship the first time. I was careless when feasting, too concentrated on the swarms of krill before me. By the time I left, they had known of my presence and began to tail me. Unfortunately for them, land-dwellers who meet me never have a good ending.

He had definitely spread rumours on his return. There was an increase in the boats out to capture me. He also specifically manned a ship of excellent personnel just to take out revenge on me. He tried to track me, day and night, but all his efforts were futile. I am not from this place, and I do not abide by the rules this place sets.

Weeks, months, have gone by, but the land-dweller has not given up. Each battle we fought, each time we clashed, there was no victor in the strife. He has lost many of his men, and I have sustained painful injuries.

Their weapons stung, greatly. With no way to heal on this alien planet, I carried the scars from the fight, swimming away bitterly after each

encounter. Three half-broken spears in my side, digging into my skin painfully. As I said, the land-dwellers are dangerous, and as an aquatic species on their planet, It is difficult, even for me, to avoid them for long.

More weeks, and more months. His ship was the most troublesome one. Unrelenting, restless, and determined to hunt me down. As dangerous as it was, there was a certain thrill to it, an excitement that I hadn't felt in the many years I've stayed here nor on my home planet.

During the second winter since they started this game of cat and mouse, I decided to put an end to it. As exhilarating as it was, the continuous hunt took up too much of my time and energy. As they approached one last time with their spears, nets, and arrows, I readied my tail and faced them head-on.

They were powerful. Very much so. The fight was close, too close for comfort. In the short time span of two winters, their gear has upgraded to become even more lethal. However, they were not powerful enough, and I tangled him, the man who started this pursuit, with his own net, down with me into the ocean's depths.

This encounter only furthered my resolve to stay hidden from the land-dwellers, as our rendezvous only ever ended in disaster.



52 hertz.

Eventually, land-dwellers knowing of my existence died off, and I soon became a rumour to them, floating about, never confirmed. Land-dwellers stilled manned ships, but never specifically sought after me.

It's been quite dull for a while, sending sounds at a frequency of 52 hertz. There were no new cetaceans after these many years, to my great disappointment. The ocean stayed relatively the same. All I could do was travel and observe, trying to figure out the mysteries of cetacea communication.

Even without being able to communicate, I was able to befriend some cetacea. Delta and Kappa were great friends, but, with my longevity, they still left me. As this process repeated, my will to explore dwindled over time.

52 hertz.

I'll admit, I was tired. Bored. Just wandering aimlessly around the water with no way off the planet, and no new creatures for me to meet, I was terribly bored. I no longer paid attention to the land-dwellers.

(I'll admit I'm yearning for thrill again, the thrill I felt when being chased down.)

52 hertz.



I was careless. Being bored lowers your guard significantly. Not noticing the apex species of any environment is a fatal error.

The land-dwellers are not us, as we are not them. They evolved and developed much faster than any of us did. Their ships are no longer wood, but rather metal and their weapons are vastly more powerful and travel at faster speeds. Strangely, they have also placed metal objects underwater everywhere, though what they are for is still unclear.

52 hertz.

They no longer aim to capture me. They still send ships trying to track me down but without the malicious intent of those hunters that once ruled the high seas. It is much easier to avoid those who only search half-heartedly, but it also takes away the thrill of the game of cat and mouse.

There have been more and more ships in search of me. With the land-dwellers' advanced technology, they discovered that on this planet, singing at a frequency of 52 hertz, I am the anomaly. I am different from the cetaceans that were so similar to me, if only slightly. The land-dwellers have combed through the oceans trying to find me, but these past decades spent avoiding them have taught me well.

52 hertz.

This world has changed in an extremely short period of time, thanks to, of course, the land-dwellers. As they flourished, the sea withered away.

Translucent materials and metal parts now fill the ocean's waters, condensing into large patches in the middle of the sea. Strangely, they don't affect me much, but some of the other creatures seem to be fading at an alarming rate.

It really is uncertain whether the actions of the land-dwellers are justified, ruining the rest of their world for their development, but as an outsider, I have no say, I wouldn't say this change is terrible, as recently, I've noticed the frequency of the sounds cetacea make is rising.

Of course, it still isn't enough for me to be able to communicate with them, and I am still unable to produce other frequencies, but one can always hope. Maybe, just maybe, I will be able to communicate with the next generation of cetacea at a frequency of 52 hertz.



Rosalyn



How To Save

A

unraveling the secret to the
mind...

Life

by
Odessa
Chan

art by Rosalyn Tang



How to Save a Life

By Odessa Chan

Alarms blared; crimson smoke filled the room. The lights flickered, sizzling with overwhelming energy. "Evacuate!" Jax screamed; it pained him to leave his creation—his life's work—behind, but this was life or death. "Veronica!" He felt around for his sister's hand, and grabbed it, running for the exit. Coughing and spluttering, he and his seven-year-old sister stumbled over piles of broken metal parts, desperately reaching for the exit. Eyes watering in the smoke, he could barely bear himself over the alarms as he shouted: "We have ten seconds to get out of here before the whole thing self-destructs!" He yanked on his sister's hand, rushing out of the hut.

As they made it to the doorway, Jax couldn't resist one last glance at his workshop, his sanctuary for so long. This was going to waste, all because of one little mistake.

"Why aren't you going to save your robot?" Veronica asked, tugging on his hand. When Jax sighed, saying nothing, she rushed into the workshop. "Robot!" she called. "Come quick!"

*"VERONICA!" Jax howled. "Get out of there! It's going to explode!" he glanced at the clock. Five seconds. "Quick! Don't mind the robot! Get back here, where it's safe!" He pleaded, his ears ringing with panic. It was only a matter of time before—
Speakers whirred. "Three. Two. One."*

"Jax!" Veronica screamed before the hut was engulfed in flames. He watched as it disintegrated into ashes, along with all that he had in there. His notes, his project, his materials, his sister. "Veronica!" Jax shouted, hoping and praying for an answer.

When the smoke had mostly dissipated, he hurried forward to the ruins, turning over stones in search of his sister. He slipped over a chunk of rubble to see his sister's face, stained, pale and lifeless. Just like that, the little split second of hope in his heart died with a last, feeble twitch.

Next to Veronica's body lay an orb of luminous substance; it shimmered in the dim light of the embers, glowing gold. Jax picked it up carefully.

He knew this was his sister's mind. Cradling it in his arms, just barely carrying Veronica's body on his shaking shoulders, he started home.



With a start, Jax awoke, sitting upright in his bed. He was drenched in a cold sweat, trembling; though there was no way to be sure whether it was because of the cold or his fear. Raising a hand to his chest, he felt for his heartbeat – terror had sent his pulse into incredible rapidity. It had been a nightmare, but also a reminder.

“Good morning. The date is June 13, 2921.” his speakers said coolly.

“Shut up, you,” he muttered under his breath. It had been two weeks since he’d lost Veronica, and he was already losing his mind. Wiping the sweat off his brow, he suddenly remembered his mother’s last words, addressed to him, “*Remember Veronica. Protect her.*”

“Sorry, Mother.” Jax managed, closing his eyes, willing for the pain to go away, for he knew he had failed her last request to him. She had died peacefully in her bed surrounded by family, holding Jax’s hand as she uttered those last words to him. Now, her mind was stored in the Sacred Hotel, along with many others.

I still had Veronica.

He lived in a world where the dead could be honoured with more than just a coffin or a gravestone; there existed a new way to preserve their memories and mind so that their spirit could feed off them and their souls may live forever. They were kept in The Sacred Hotel – essentially a library for spirits.

Jax peered out of his windows at his front door. Just as he had suspected, someone was waiting outside for him. “That Theo,” he muttered under his breath; he couldn’t help but smile. “Always knows when to show up, huh?” Together, the friends sat down in the living room of Jax’s home. His fireplace sizzled in the background as they talked, and the room smelt thinly of rosewater, the same scent Jax had once recognised as his *home, sweet home*.

“Not another nightmare, Jax,” Theo sighed worriedly. “What’s done is done. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Isn’t there?” Jax looked away, trying to sound offhand.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Theo leaned in dangerously. “We’ve



discussed this before. There's no way you're going to pull this off. Think of the risks – anything and everything could go wrong”

Forced to look his friend in the eye, Jax remained silent.

“You can't possibly be considering this,” Theo continued. “To take one's mind and place it into a new body – and expect it to work?!”

“This is the only reason why I haven't given Veronica up to the Hotel yet. I can do it.” Jax responded quietly. “Look, Theo, you wouldn't understand, but...”

He looked out of his window and at the sky. The golden net woven within the atmosphere, the Spirit Barrier, shone brighter than before; it was almost as if Jax could see Veronica smiling down at him through the glittering threads.

That smile... it seemed so far away now. It strained Jax to remember his late sister's face. “... It's because of the Spirit Barrier's protection that we are thriving; no more dangers, and the Village grows splendid day by day,” he continued breathlessly. “I could never deny my sister the life she could have led in this beautiful place.” *I would have to be a monster to do that.* Theo stood; the shadows under his grey eyes told Jax that he, too, hadn't had a very pleasant night's sleep.

“What has the world gone to?” he murmured. “How did technology get so advanced that we could just talk about bringing people back from the dead? This is wrong.”

“You don't have to help me with this if you don't want to, you know,” muttered Jax, finally standing up gingerly, not meeting his friend's eyes. “I'd understand if you didn't come with me. I know how you feel about this. But I want you to know, I'm not stopping. I'm not giving up until my sister is back, and there's nothing anybody can do. I'm sorry.”

He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Theo, looking at him intently with a fiery sort of determination in his eyes. Understanding flickered between them, and at long last, he nodded.

Jax reached towards a chest at the very back of the room. Laying his finger



on the metaline surface of it, he savoured a last glance at the comfort of his fire. The chest opened with a soft click at his touch, revealing a small velvet pouch, which he knew was the orb – Veronica’s mind.

Two days after Veronica’s death, the Hotel’s guardians, the Saints, visited Jax asking for her mind. Knowing he couldn’t give it to them, he stashed it carefully in his family’s chest. It hadn’t been found; the Saints believed that it had indeed burned away alongside Veronica’s body.

“Are you ready, then?” Jax asked, pulling the pouch out. He noticed that it weighed more than he remembered, and now, as was his sense of responsibility as the elder brother. *I can do this. I have to do this.*

“Quickly, before I change my mind about agreeing to help you,” Theo said briskly, his eyes fixed on the pouch as Jax fumbled to open it. Light escaped through the gap, allowing the pouch, and the space around it, to glow faintly.

Fanning himself with his hand furiously in the heat, Jax let his knees buckle and lay down after what felt like days on days of nonstop work and agitation. And now, he was exhausted. He looked outside. The sky had fallen; the thin, crescent moon lit the streets before his window, where most lights had already been dimmed.

Then he glimpsed at his watch.

It had been around nine in the morning when they started working; with the help of Jax’s notes, the ones he had salvaged from the ashes of his workshop, the clock had just barely struck midnight when they completed Veronica’s new body.

She was Jax’s new masterpiece; a combination of modern technology, his version of AI—artificial intelligence—and soon, Veronica’s mind. Jax had constructed the new face as close to Veronica’s he could possibly muster, replicating her blue eyes, elfish ears, and choppy, waist-length hair.

It will embody her perfectly. Jax couldn’t help but smile at the thought of his sister returning to him, alive. He silently vowed not to let anything happen to her again.

“It’s time.” He said at last, looking at the orb, Veronica’s orb, sitting innocently at the edge of his worktable.

Theo offered nothing but a curt nod.

Jax carefully felt for a small button on the back of “Veronica”’s head. Every man-made being had a weak point, and for “Veronica”, it was a small latch at the back of her head, which opened up to her electronic brain, where the real Veronica’s mind would be placed.

Tentatively, he pressed it.

He felt the whirl of gears as the opening formed; it was as if an invisible blade was slicing through the skin on the back of the neck to make way for a small compartment, just big enough for the plum-sized orb to fit in.

Closing his eyes and hoping, praying quietly for all his life was worth, Jax took the golden orb, Veronica’s mind, and inserted it carefully into her new body.

“Do you think it’ll work?” He asked. Even without looking, he knew Theo was shaking his head. “Come on, man. Have some faith in me, will you?” He said with a slight laugh. This time, he glanced up to see a flicker of a smile on Theo’s face too.

“Just do it,” Theo muttered, failing to suppress his laugh.

Taking a deep breath and holding it there in his chest, Jax pressed the button again and the compartment closed itself up. He stood, making space for the body as it shivered. Theo stepped a little closer to him, and both of them waited.

A twitch, and then a flick of the hand, and then her first breath.

Jax’s heart raced. He crouched down to examine her. The slight heave in her chest showed that she was breathing; the tips of her fingers glowed a beautiful gold, signifying her energy, her life’s passage through her body once again.

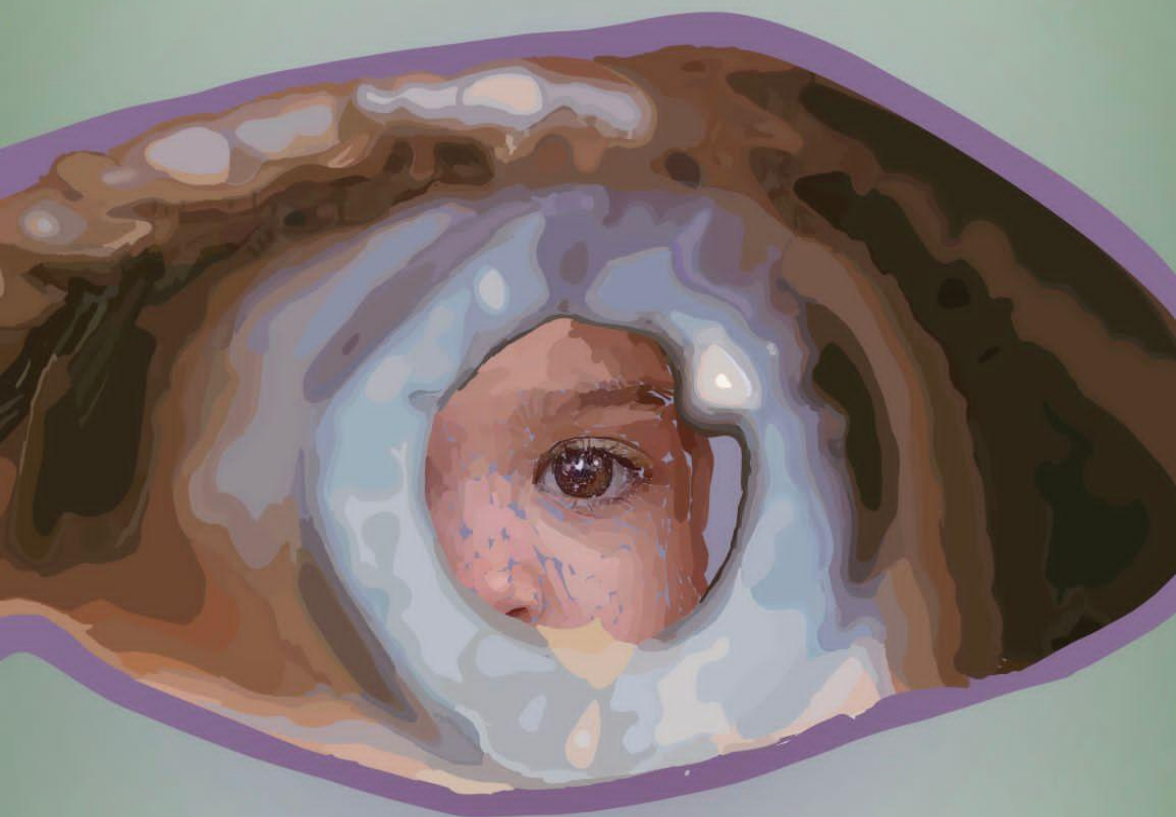
“Veronica?”

He continued to wait, staring at “Veronica”’s face, looking for the slightest hint of success. Next to him, Theo looked away, crossing his fingers.

“You can do it, Veronica,” coached Jax, whispering in his sister’s ear. “I believe in you.” At long last, “Veronica” opened her eyes. Jax stifled a gasp as he gazed in wonder at those blue eyes. Her blue eyes. Just looking at them made his own misty; he blinked the tears away and helped his sister sit up.

“I missed you.”

a mother's love



JULIE

rhea ng

Julie

By Rhea Ng

My dearest Augustus,

I miss you.

Sometimes I think about you and I can't sleep, eat or think because it's unbearable. It's like someone ripped my heart out and forced a new one in. Pumping blood through my veins just for the sake of it. But I don't want it anymore, not without you. The way you used to smell of cedarwood and bourbon intoxicated me. The way your eyes used to glisten under the soft glow of moonlight captivated me. You were my everything.

Now you're just gone. I'm blind without you.

Julie and I have been in hiding for a year. They've been searching for us for a while now, but they haven't had any success. I know this isn't what we dreamed of for her, but I'm trying my best. I'm sorry.

Happy birthday my love. I'm thinking of you always.

All the love in the world,

Janaia

September 30th, 2132.

A thunderous *boom* yanked me awake from the tranquil lull of slumber. I peeled my eyes open, my dormant brain gradually processing this information. *Who was here?* I gasped as I calculated the possibilities. No one ever came. I hardly had any connections... Not anymore.



I squinted at the monitor, straining my drowsy eyes, struggling to identify who the mystery man could be. A jet black coat, triangular sunglasses, and a distinguishable, governmental wristband. My heart dropped instantly, muscles tensing up, a million thoughts sprinting through my head. *What did he know? Why was he here?*

Gathering myself, my shivering hands reached for the cold, steel handle, and twisted the door open.

“Smith, Benjamin Smith.” His gruff, hoarse voice was so hushed I could barely make out what he was saying. He turned his head diligently, checking if anyone followed him. “We met at a diner a few years ago. I was a friend of Augustus.” He took off his glasses, allowing me to analyze his face. His features were familiar, warm.

He hesitated for a moment and sighed.

“The government sent me to let you know that they know about Julie. They know she’s not genetically modified. I’m sorry. I don’t know how, but they just do. From the bottom of my heart, I send my deepest apologies.” I stared at him with a wide-eyed expression, only just letting this information strike my mind. Before he could let me respond, he handed me a letter.

“He gave this to me before he passed in case this happened. I haven’t seen the contents of this letter, but I hope it helps. He really loved you, Janaia. Whatever he says, you should give it a try. The test will be taken in 3 days at 9 AM sharp. If Julie does not pass the test,” he took a large breath and looked at me solemnly, then closed his eyes, preparing himself for what he was about to say. “She will be executed.”

His words rang in my head.

She will be executed.

A wave of thoughts crashed against my mind and I was drowning. Every time I felt relief, another wave consumed me. I was engulfed by Benjamin's words, the sudden news strangled me as I drowned in torrents of despair.

I had 3 days.

Then she would be gone. Forever. Just as Augustus had left me.

Except, this time, she would be executed. And, it would hurt even more.

My fingertips brushed along the off-white envelope as tears welled up in my eyes. This was Augustus' last message to me. His last words. I took a deep breath and ripped open the packaging. His handwriting was scrawled all over the page with smudged ink.

Janaia,

You have to steal the papers. There is no other way. The security is extensive and if you choose to try, it will be dangerous and you will have to be vigilant.

Room 231

Passcode: 283746

Here is a strand of Benjamin's hair. It is essential to be authorized into the building. If there is trouble, he will be involved as well. Don't get caught.

I love you. Send my love to Julie as well.

Augustus

The letter still smelled of him. Cedarwood and bourbon.

“Julie, you have to stay here. If anyone knocks on the door, don’t answer. Don’t say a word.” I crouched down to look into her eyes. Her watery, rheumy eyes were brimming with tears, like a ruptured dam, ready to spill at any moment. Her rosy cheeks were flushed, her mesmerizing expression tempting me to fold. Of course, she didn’t know that.

“When will you come back?” Her faint whisper brought me a question I didn’t know how to answer. I would either come home in two days or not at all.

I hesitated as I formulated my cautious answer. “Two days, darling, I promise. I love you, Jules.” I choked and kissed her on the cheek. I took a good look at her one last time.

She flashed a weak smile at me and whispered, “I love you too, mama.” The tears in her eyes flowed down her cheeks like a waterfall.

I prayed that I could keep to my promise.

Two robots greeted me at the entrance of the government tower. I presented a strand of Benjamin's hair, just as Augustus had told me to do. With a nod of approval and a zap, I was let through.

As I walked up to the door, a gush of icy, forbidding, lifeless air traveled up my spine. It was dark. Fumbling for the light switch, my eyes explored the room, barely able to see a thing. The ticking of the clock became encompassing, knowing that I had already spent over a day. My footsteps echoed through the halls, and the lights finally switched on. It was automatic. I kept my head low as I tried to keep my presence subtle and quiet.

What seemed like a million doors materialized in front of me. The hallway was ceaseless and daunting. Augustus had told me it was room 231, but the room numbers were random. They went from 3135, 235, then 23482. My brain tried to lead me forward, but my feet wouldn't budge. There was too much to go through, and there was no time.

My footsteps guided me through the never ending hallway, echoing through the space, each step getting heavier and heavier as if my feet were dragging through a pot of thick, perpetual honey. My lungs gasped hysterically for air as I remembered who I was doing this for. *Julie. Julie. Julie.* The thought of her encouraged me, persuaded me to keep going as my eyes scanned the hallway looking for the door. I promised her I would come back.

231.....

And then I found it. Door 231.

I came to a halt as I gathered myself and approached the doorway. The drumming of my beating heart began to quiet down, stabilizing as I wiped the beads of sweat from my forehead. The sounds of the crackling bulbs made me jump, whipping my head around to survey my surroundings.

On the higher part of the door rested a small keypad, invisible to the unobservant. Only if you were alert would you see the dull, monotonous mechanism. Nothing about it was engaging, almost camouflaging with the door itself. I examined it closely, squinting my eyes to analyze every detail. *283746*, I recited. Pressing the buttons on the lock, every click made a distinctive beep, blaring as my presence became clear to anyone who happened to be here.

I prayed no one heard it.

With a creak, the door opened, revealing a simple office setup. Cabinets were neatly sitting next to rows of tables, one of them undoubtedly holding Julie's paper.

I examined the area for cameras. I could smell something like cigars with a metallic hint coming from the walls. My footsteps were cautious, delicate, as I tiptoed inwards.

Opening the cabinets, I scanned the papers thoroughly, trying to find Julie's name among a sea of documents. My fingertips scraped over the edge of

each file, leaving papercuts and piercing pain in my skin.

Then, I saw her name.

Julie Laurier.

With a sigh of relief, I reached for her file in anticipation. I had finally done it. I saved Julie. She would have the life Augustus and I dreamed of.

But then, my hand went through the paper.

I clenched my fist, trying with all my might to grasp the file, catch it, do whatever it takes to have it in my hands.

Shock paralyzed my body as I came to a revelation.

It was a hologram. They knew I was coming. With a distinctive beeping sound, the alarms were blaring and I heard the sound of booming footsteps echo through the hallway. Turning around, I could spot the scarlet light on the ceiling spinning furiously like it was trying to detect something, someone. As my breathing grew rapid, time seemed to slow.

As the repeating footsteps got closer, I braced myself for the sight I was about to see. There was nothing I could do anymore. Eyelids closing, I took a deep breath and hoped Julie would forgive me.

But when I opened my eyes, Julie was right there.

Her body was bruised, covered in blue, black, and red. Her livelihood was stolen, her innocence vanished, her delicate smile long gone. Her dress was torn with burnt patches all over. Her face was overwhelmed by tears, dirt, and smoke coating her fragile face.

I hopelessly ran towards her and placed my hand on her cheek, wiping away her tears.

“Julie, Julie, darling, are you okay? What happened?” Frantic, I searched for her eyes, the eyes that would tell me that everything would be okay. But she didn’t open them.

“Desperate, are we?”

I could hear his loathsome smirk from miles away. His voice sent tremors down my spine, as my heart skipped a beat. I heard his footsteps coming towards me, hefty boots weighing down on the concrete, frigid floor. Benjamin appeared in a black suit, identical to the one he wore before, and looked into my eyes with an expression so intense, I was silenced.

“The letter... the letter...” My voice quivered as I realized what he had done. He deceived me, betrayed me from the very beginning.

“Was fake. Took you long enough to figure it out. I can’t believe you fell for it.” Finishing my sentence, he strode into the room. His mocking laughter humiliated me, leaving me torn.

I just wanted my daughter to live.

“I thought it would be more difficult than this if I’m being honest. You fell

right into my trap and so did Julie.” He grabbed the collar of my shirt, drenched with sweat, and forced me up from the floor. I was strangled, struggling to breathe as he pulled me closer to him, eyes losing focus on the situation at hand. My lungs gasped for air, mouth opening slightly as I pathetically begged him to stop. His hands unclenched, setting me free from my misery.

Panting, I demanded, “How could you do this? You were Augustus’ friend!”.

Benjamin Smith barked out a laugh. “Friends? Friends! We were constantly in competition for a higher position. No one in my field is ever friends, Janaia. After all, I killed him. Oops! Probably shouldn’t have told you that. Well, that’s okay, you won’t be alive long enough to tell anyone anyway.”

He killed Augustus.

I was stunned. Of course, it had all come together. He replaced Augustus.

“The government has been looking for Julie for a year. Now that I’ve got you both, I’ll have the highest rank in the system, and....”

I could barely comprehend what he said. Blood rushed through my ears and a surge of adrenaline pumped through my system. It was now or never.

I sprinted towards the door and looked Julie in the eyes.

“Run.”

She let out a muffled cry and bolted for the elevator shaft.

I slammed the door shut, locking us in the room. Stretching out my limbs to cover the doorway, I braced myself for the worst. I hoped that this would buy Julie some time. Enough time to live.

“You really are stupid. Guess it runs in the family.” He let out a soft chuckle. A sharp jolt went through my body. Everything stopped.

Dear mama,

Today, I turn 21.

I will never forget the look on your face when you told me to run. The unconditional love you had for me seeped through every syllable, your fearless expression gave me the strength to keep going. Because they couldn't find me, they declared me dead. Though I've spent my life in hiding, I've found people who support me and give me the space to live. I learned so much about myself and this world and I wish I could share that with you. You sacrificed your life for me and I wish I could have saved yours. I'm thinking of you every day, mama. I love you. I miss you.

All the love in the world,

Julie.

~ END ~

LAB RAT

BY ANGIE WANG



Lab Rat

By Angie Wang

Do I really want to do this?

I see my wavering brown eyes reflected on the glass syringe. I have merely seconds to decide.

The room is motionless except for the methodical beeping of the machine. I hear my rough, ragged breathing. Hesitancy and anxiety flood my face, and my eyes start to water uncontrollably. To never be able to hear again. To lose the memory of leaves rustling, the waves of the ocean washing up on the shore, the swells and falls of symphonies, my mother's light-footed dance steps, but most of all, to lose Bear's bark, sometimes filled with passion, sometimes with sorrow, and sometimes with joy...

Nonetheless, I hold the syringe and move it closer to my arm, shaking but unrelenting. I live life like a prisoner, as one of the scientists' little white mice. All because I have the unusual ability to hear.

Isn't this the moment I had been waiting for in my entire life? A path to freedom?

Eight years ago

My childhood was innocent, naive; shielded from the knowledge that I was different from the others. My home was a haven, and I indulged myself with the braille books we had in the library.

But it all changed when I was six years old.



“This is where we began,” The teacher signed with her hands.

A video starts, and there’s a woman in the corner signing with her hands. “Once we lived in the sound era.” When she signed “sound” she touched her ear and then shook her hand a few times. It was a sign that we had never seen before. Typically, the teacher would then give us an object to feel or touch. But when we turned to look at her, she just shook her hand and shrugged.

“Sound is defined scientifically as ‘the mechanical disturbance from a state of equilibrium that propagates through an elastic material medium.’ It’s a sense that allows us to interact with others by delivering and receiving sounds instead of signs. Sounds can convey emotion and sounds can encompass a variety of moods. Some sounds are sharp, like a knife, some are low and deep, while some are high and shrill. Some are mellow, like silk and butter, while some are harsh and unfriendly, like black and grey.”

“Our ears used to detect these sounds and translate them into electrical signals that our brain could understand, but humankind was plagued by bacterial meningitis, which was associated with unilateral hearing loss. The bacteria spread quickly, and since many impoverished countries were unable to receive treatment, the bacteria mutated various times and had the ability to make people completely deaf.

Nobody was left unaffected; the people who managed to survive by isolating themselves died in one to two generations. The rest of the human population was completely deaf. However, animals still retain the ability to hear as they were unaffected by the pandemic.

We were lost for a long time— it’s like losing your sight, like a big part of you was taken away. It took humanity many years to adapt and learn before society emerged as we know it today.”

As I went home that day, my mom had a surprise— Bear. “The

neighbours just gave it to us. Nobody wanted it, since it's blind." she signed from afar. "I thought you might——"

Her final words didn't get a chance to register. I sprinted towards the dog excitedly, delight blazing across my eyes. He had floppy ears and patches of brown and black on his pelt, and his eyes were a kind of glassy grey. His fur was matted and dirty, with strands falling off and patches of raw skin showing on his back and his limbs, indicative of mistreatment. He lay on the turf weakly with his eyes half open and his body against the ground.

Bear let out a feeble cry in anguish as I touched his skin lightly.

I felt myself signing "it's going to be okay" to him until I realized he was blind.

I stopped for a moment, then I tried to give a gentle bark, conveying as much comfort and empathy as I could, stroking his head. He gave a gentle rumble and reclined against my hand. I felt his infirm, bony body against my arm and tried to lift him, but he protested with agonized whimpers and plaints.

Suddenly, the sentences from the video came back. The exchange of sounds to communicate. Sounds can carry emotion. Animals still retained the ability to hear.

Struck by a sudden revelation, I sprang up in astonishment. I sprinted to my mother and signed furiously, "I can hear! I can hear!"

She thought for a moment but still looked unsure of what I meant. But she chose to believe me and smiled at me with motherly pride. The golden light behind her eyes encompassed more meaning and emotion than our signs ever could. It contained warmth that couldn't be captured by hand gestures. Then I tried to imagine what it would be like if she could make a sound.

Gentle like the wind, smooth like chocolate and butter.
"It's a gift from above," she signed as we broke from our embrace.

We both didn't know how wrong she could be.

The next day, I ran to school, jumping and galloping like a wild horse. I reveled in the ambiance around me, the sweet, quotidian chirrups of the birds, the plinks of Bear's paws on the ground, the sound of butter sizzling in the pan, and water oozing and gushing out of the tap.

Nature and man-made architecture blended together seamlessly, with trees and groves growing amongst the smooth curves of metal that composed the skyscrapers at the city center.

I noticed the strange silence from the houses. I could only hear water running and oil spitting from the stove, and there was nothing else. The electric cars sped past soundlessly, and the soft hum of the air conditioner was all that welcomed me as I pushed open the school gates.

The warmth of adrenaline reached every pore of my skin, and I burned with feverish excitement.

"I can hear!" I signed up to my friends. They looked at me in puzzlement, confusion dotting their eyes, expressions slack.

Somewhat displeased with their response, I hurried to my teacher.

"I can hear!" I signed it to my teacher. She looked at me confused and

imitated my signs as if in question. I nodded. She contemplated for a moment, then she signed in hesitation, "Really?"

I nodded frantically while hating how I seemed so desperate. My nose soured and I was on the verge of tears. Her face was blank but she nodded, patting my shoulder limply. I barely felt her touch.

My heart fell, and I felt numb, apathetic. The adrenaline rush had passed, and all I felt was cold— as if I was suddenly immersed in ice. That's when I realized that no one would ever know what I meant. No one would ever know what it is like to hear.

But on the second day when I went to school, someone unusual was waiting for me. He wore a white coat with pockets and buttons and reeked of blood and lavender. His smile was lopsided, and there was a savage, wild glint behind his eye. He squatted down to meet my height as my teacher introduced him as the "scientist" with her signs.

"See, we're going to take you away for a while, alright? Your ability is very special, it's nothing like what we've seen for several decades, and we all want to take a closer look at you." He smiled at me, his coal-black eyes burning into my honeyed hazel ones.

His offhand compliment still flattered my childish vanity, and I was desperate, yearning for some validation after my frustration. I looked at him with naive hope— hope that he'd understand me, understand what I experienced.

He seemed to surmise my thoughts and nodded at me, tightening his grip on my hand, his old, yellowed fingers clawing against my soft, freckled skin.

Just as hesitancy crept in and I began to pull away, he held my wrist in an ironclad grip and dragged me out of the door roughly.

I let out a shriek and started kicking and fighting against his grasp, but my efforts were futile. The teacher stepped back and ushered the children away from me, who were all immobilized in terror, their mouths open and eyes wide. She wouldn't look at me, and I knew she had been involved in a part of this.

My body stiffened and I let out a forceful breath. My eyebrows scrunched up in fury, and I pounded the man's flesh with blind anger. I didn't want to believe that she had betrayed me, that she had given me up to a stranger.

But the truth was sharp and painful, and it would always be so.

At the gates, a black car was awaiting us. He banged on the windows and signed at the person angrily. "Get her a dose of —!" The last sign was something I couldn't recognize.

Before I could register what was happening, a black-clothed person leaped out of the car.

He inserted a dart with pink feathers into a gun, and aimed for my arm. Whatever it was, it would control me, sedate me. I knew any attempt to escape was now too late.

Right before I blacked out, I used all my energy to give one last cry of hope: the bark that Bear taught me. I desperately hoped that sound could travel that far.

I rubbed my eyes as I slowly blinked awake. Numerous IVs were sticking into my arms. The smell of antiseptic and alcohol pervaded the room, and I was lying on a hospital bed with white sheets. Someone had clothed me in a white shirt and white pants.

The air was silent except for the rhythmical huffs and puffs of the machines working around the room.

I glanced around frantically, striving to seek something familiar to ease my nerves. Everything around me was a pattern of unending white, only broken by machinery that was too complex for my understanding.

There was no door, no visible opening to escape. I felt a deadening weight plunging into the pit of my stomach as I realized that I would no longer return to my carefree life again.

The white walls opened, revealing an automated door. A woman with auburn hair and piercing eyes walked in. She wore the same large white coat, so I assumed she was another one of those "scientists".

"We are going to do a few experiments to find out how you got this ability," she signed. Her movements were robotic, without emotion, and she met my red, irate countenance with a calm, composed mask that betrayed nothing.

"Later, journalists may interview you to describe what sound is like. You will stay in this room and be given adequate sustenance each day." She signs at me. "If you behave well, we'll give you your dog."

Bear? I thought. So he did hear me? My anger began to recede slowly, the red on my face gradually returning to pale white skin.

I sat stiffly in my hospital bed, my face cold and harsh. I would cooperate, but that would be it.

A doctor entered my room, brusquely opening my mouth and swabbing the inside of my cheek. I wanted to protest, but I thought of Bear, so I gave in grudgingly.

They gave me tapes from different parts of the ancients' world for "cultural preservation", each one labeled with scribbles and loops arranged strangely: "Ocean waves", "Windy breeze", "Raindrops", "Storm", "Cafe", "Summer night", ...

Then they played me music— something so wonderful and exquisite that was ineffable. Though I could not comprehend what the song told, the emotions that it conveyed through the tones were palpable.

It was a perfect concoction of beats and rhythms, an audible blend of emotions, a tangible atmosphere that was unique to each "song". It felt like the creator was trying to communicate his or her sentiments, to immerse the listener in his story, his life; it was personal yet universal.

Bear was allowed in my room after each day ended, and I would sing the songs I heard to him. His warm muzzle was close to my heart, and his cloudy, unclear eyes found my teary ones. I held onto his paw tightly, burying my thick red curls under his fur, desperate for warmth. After the day went by, my insides felt hollow, and without anything to distract me, I felt empty, purposeless. I felt like a lifeless object that people experimented on to no avail.

I sobbed soundlessly into his pelt, gasping quietly in the inky black darkness, my body shaking from the onslaught of tears. Bear seemed to understand. He pressed his back against me tightly, letting out a soft bark. I stroked his fur while gulping for air as tears kept gushing down my cheeks and splattered on the blanket.

Plink. Plop. Plink.

It was all I could do to not scream. I held on to Bear for dear life, the single thing that signified normalcy, familiarity, and I cried myself to sleep.

The next day, I signed to the woman stonily, "When can I go back?"

She ignored me, opening my mouth for another swab. I locked it firmly shut. She sighed at me, reaching for the controller. I braced myself for the electric shock, and I did not relent.

She tried again five times, bringing agonized tears to my eyes, but I would not cooperate. I needed to know.

"Fine." She signed, vexation flooding her face.

"You'll stay until we can find out what makes you hear."
Then I was forced back into my old routine.

Wake up. Eat. Test. Sound reviews.

Bear.

Sleep.

Six years passed, and they still found nothing. I remained trapped in their

snow-white prison.

Through a small crack in the wall, I could see some of their conversations in the lab.

“... we need her..... human civilization developed much faster in the sound age... she’s the key...”

They looked more and more defeated as time passed, pressed and pressured harder and harder to dig out information as their experiments returned few results.

As my birthday passed again, I realized I needed to come up with a strategy to get myself free. I needed to make them trust me. I became obliging and started to smile at the people who came to work with me. I offered to help them with their work. Hesitant at first, they gradually accepted my offer and showed me how to do rudimentary tasks in the lab. They began to leave the door open sometimes. I was careful to not betray their trust. I could commit, I thought to myself, gritting my teeth.

So I did. For two years. They began to laugh and sign with me sometimes. I smiled and joked back. After they worked in the labs, as soon as they were gone, I observed the surveillance cameras from afar. If they were red, I was immobile. If they were black, I would race in to check if they left anything useful. There was almost always nothing.

Then one day, they were testing the antibiotic resistance of my microbiome in the lab, to see if any of them could combat gentamicin, a type of aminoglycoside that could cause hearing loss and damage to the inner ear. They left the door open, and one of them went to check on Bear. The results seemed disappointing because the others went out with drooping heads. I pretended to be asleep. The camera was off.



Knowing it was my only opportunity, I ran out of my room. The bottle of gentamicin lay on the table, with an empty syringe on the side.

Present

The hand holding the syringe moved closer to my arm. Closer. Even closer.

The sound of someone's footsteps comes from the doorway, light and airy, like a dancer's. I could hear her tinkly laughter grow louder as the footsteps came closer. My mother! A red light starts blinking in the corner of my eye. Blinded by an overwhelming desire and a dizzying excitement, I drop the syringe, which falls onto the ground. I rush in the direction of her sound, wanting to return to the times when she held me in her embrace; the time when I was free. But then, it suddenly stops. The door leading back to the lab with the syringe disappeared. Someone deactivated it.

That's when I understood that it was all a ploy. They found out at the last minute. It was a sound recording. For me to forget the syringe. Forget my last hope of freedom. The scientists' hostile laughter pours into the room. I quail at the sound.

A screen flickers to life revealing the man with the coal-black hair. He begins to sign with a venomous, malicious sneer upon his lips.

"Close call, little one. You will never escape unless we find the key to how you hear.





METAMORPHOSIS

By
Sarah Zhang

Metamorphosis

By Shu Qing Zhang

11192077

Faye

I leaned against the window, trying to drown out the high-pitched laughter and half-drunk hollers. The lights sent color pooling on my dress and strange shadows dancing on the walls. My fingers clasped onto the lapel of the black blazer and drew it tighter around me.

“Toasting time! Get your drinks and gather around... it’s bad luck to toast with empty glasses.” A breathy voice sailed above our heads. A teenager raised her glass lazily, taking no notice of the drink that sloshed over the rim.

People in silk and satin gathered to refill their drinks. I glanced at the few last drops gathering at the bottom of my glass. That’ll do. Lingering in the shadow, I closed my eyes. Images pulsed beneath my eyelids, drawing me back in time.

~

11182077

Faye

The alarm cut through my dusty room. I forgot to turn it off last night again. 6:30 a.m., Saturday. The lights flickered on as I stumbled to the bathroom.

“Your rent again, Faye.” A voice called from next door. “Thanks, Mal,” I replied sleepily. Mal always arrives promptly at 6 a.m. and leaves by 6 p.m., like this place is her office rather than her apartment. “Friends for three years and I still don’t know much about her,” I muttered out loud. No one



1 0 3

here seems to care about anyone else. I swung open the door and saw a slip of paper lying in the hallway. It was still warm from the printer. I stuffed the paper under my mattress. I should try to gain some progress before the morning dose of Felidine dilutes my concentration.

Like many days before, the “ding ” rang again when I was at the peak of my concentration. My fingers twitched once and froze. “Time for your daily intake.” I tried to resume my carving, but I’ve lost focus. Sensing the lack of movement, the voice continued. “The Felidine is essential for keeping a healthy mind. It ensures the functionality of the citizens and prevents mental illnesses. Please consume your dose within five minutes. Thank you.” I huffed and stretched my arm towards the clear vial. I tipped my head back slightly, wincing as its saccharine contents slid down my throat. I could feel the Felidine circulated to my brain, clouding the heaviness I felt earlier. The room spun in and out of focus and the slim craft knife slipped between my fingers.

~

Just as I decided to take a short break after lunch, a shout rang out through the empty hall.

“Sir. Please follow us to the Rehabilitation Center now. You require immediate medical attention.” Faces emerged from the cracks of the doors. Two guards stood in the middle of the hall, one tall one short, both glaring down at a skeletal man. On the back of their black uniform were 014 and 214, printed in crisp white.

“No!” A man swatted at the hands of the guards. “Give me your Felidine!”

He breathed in raggedly, his body shaking with effort. “I need it. Now!”

His bony hands grappled desperately at the pocket of 214, who shoved him back roughly with a look of disgust. He swayed and stumbled onto the floor, breathing heavily on his side. The two guards turned to each other and lowered their voices in a rushed discussion.

I opened my door a little wider. The man had sunken cheeks and yellow teeth, his bloodshot eyes were watery under the harsh lighting. He tugged at his tangled hair restlessly as the guards turned towards him once more.



214 fished out a syringe, assembling it quickly before passing it to the outstretched hand of 014. The taller guard strode towards the man, his boots echoing menacingly through the hall. The man backed away on all fours, trembling. 014 bent over the man, staring into his eyes. “You are useless now”, he

enunciated every word slowly, holding a wicked grin. His hands found the man’s neck in one swift motion. A hoarse scream erupted as the thin syringe pricked through the skin. He twitched and jerked, desperately trying to shake off the gloved hands.

“None of your business here!” 214 turned to shout at us, as 014 steadily pushed down the syringe. People shrank back through their door. I inched backward, leaving a slit for me to see through.

A quiet sigh escaped from the man as his features relaxed. I turned away, preparing to close the door. Another scream tore through the silence of the hall. My hand froze, and I leaned towards the gap in the door again. The guard held him down firmly as he frantically tried to run away from the thin air next to him. His pupil shrank into a dot of black within gray iris as the coral red liquid continued to drain like an hourglass. Finally, the man’s eyelids drooped again and his body thudded against the wall. The guards straightened up. The air reeked of cloying sweetness.

I stared at the scene. A thin stream of red stained his collar. His lips were tinged blue and his breathing was shallow. He was going to die.

It was only then I recognized him as our neighbor Luke. One of the few people who always greets me with a smile when we pass each other in the hallway. My mind snagged at that thought as I eased the door shut. Through the small peephole on the door, I watched the guards carry his body out of sight.

~

Mal

I tugged at the blue latex gloves. No matter how many times I’ve worn them, I could never get used to the clammy sensation of oil and sweat trapped against my skin. The heel of my leather boots clicked softly as I



walked to the I-Room, where all footage and data are gathered.

Every corner of the labs, hallways, and conference rooms has cameras, silently monitoring all affairs within its parameters. Data collected from experiments and investigations must be uploaded within 48 hours. Even for the most secretive projects. It seemed to be necessary for them to keep a tight eye on the creators of such a powerful weapon. I let the thought elicit a small smirk.

“Mal.” The guard nodded at me. “You know the drill. What do you need and why do you need it?”

“Footage from Camera 107 for data comparison.” I watched as he inserted the code without hesitation.

Five minutes later, I walked out, carefully arranging my expression into a calm mask. My mind flew back to Faye. Young, struggling, but talented. I hurried back to District 0709, enclosed within my mind.

~

Faye

I spent the rest of the afternoon lying on my bed. My eyes drifted around the room, and my fingers fidgeted restlessly against the hem of my shirt. I was all too aware of the residual sweetness of the Felidine I took after lunch. Finally, I sat up, groaning out loud. I needed a breath of “fresh air”, as they used to say.

The sun dipped past the horizon, tinting the smoky air rosy orange. The pollution blurred the sun into a faint distant haze. I lazily turned to look at the people. The suspended walkways held an endless flow of people. No one paused for a glance at the sunset. No one talked to each other either. The hallways echoed with the scattered footsteps of workers. A brief flash of denim blue caught my eye, a dash of saturation amidst a sea of muted tones. My gaze flickered to a figure wearing a white shirt and blue jeans. Mal.

~



Mal

Faye stood alone next to the glass. She blends in well with her oversize sweater and messy hair. Only her bright curious eyes stood out from the crowd. She smiled when she saw me.

“Thought I’d take a walk. Anything interesting?” She asked as I approached.

“Just work.” I never told her what my work was. “You? How’s being a children’s therapist?”

“Boring.” She paused, making a face. “I’m just there for Felidine. I can sell them to the artists for more money.”

“Those who don’t work don’t get nearly as much Felidine as they need.” I lifted my chin subtly, eyes flicking to the surveillance camera. “Also, it is a pity children under 12 can’t take the Felidine. It would save you from being a children’s therapist.”

She opened her mouth to agree, but closed it, her lips pressing into a thin line. Was it Luke’s death? His pale face flashed in my mind and I cringed inwardly. I heard her exhale and shrug casually, “But then I would have to find another job.”

I nodded along, my thoughts wandering back to the dark security room. From my peripheral vision, I registered Faye’s curious glance. I sighed.

~

Faye

I glanced at Mal. The shadows under her eyes were obvious under the artificial light. Her gaze was far away as if her mind wandered from the present.

We walked back to our apartments. Just as I pushed through the door to my capsule, a “ding” sounded. I was halfway to the vial when I stopped abruptly, Luke’s scream rushing back to me. “Time for your daily intake. The Felidine is essenti-” I snatched it up and gulped it in one breath. My



eyes squeezed shut as I felt the syrup snake down my esophagus.

After dinner, Mal knocked and beckoned me through the half-open door. She wants me to go to her place? I followed, slightly curious.

Her room was extraordinarily neat. Various beakers, measuring cylinders, and test tubes are placed around a pristine lab to the right of the door.

“Don’t worry, I temporarily altered the camera so it showed pre-recorded footage.” She said, glancing at her watch. “Although it will only last for another 4 hours.”

“Felidine is the most potent opioid synthesized.” I blinked at her directness. She always cuts straight to the point. “When the opioid substances bind to the mesolimbic pathway, it releases dopamine, producing the feeling of euphoria, and Felidine amplifies that.”

“People are slowly getting addicted to this feeling,” I replied, keenly aware of the Felidine's effect hooking at the corner of my lips.

“Yes. Everyone here is paid in Felidine. It is what motivates them to work, yes?” I nodded, swallowing hard.

I hesitated, “Felidine...its effect seems to lessen the longer we take them, so we eventually have to get more of it for the same impact.”

“Drug tolerance. Your body experiences a reduced reaction to a drug after repeated usage.” “And what happened earlier...” I said tentatively, “to Luke?”

“Withdrawal symptoms.” Seeing my confusion, she explained, “He developed a dependence on the drug. I assume the side effects of the drug prevent him from working, and therefore he does not receive Felidine. The discontinuation of the drug causes physical and mental effects called withdrawal symptoms. They killed Luke because his withdrawal symptoms are too severe for him to work properly.” Her uneasiness was concealed with a mask of cold indifference, but I still caught a slight hitch in her voice.

“Vicious cycle...” My fingers fidgeted restlessly under the table.



“Over time, people will end up working more and more to get the Felidine they want. The more you work, the more material and resources they have at their disposal. Once you have worn your body to its limits, they will kill you.”

“They?”

“The Uppers.” She paused, reading my expression. “You’ve heard of them.”

Yes, I’ve heard dozens of rumors about them. Rumors that whispered of people who live in a place so heavenly they must be gods themselves.

“Have you ever wondered why everyone lives below the 50th floor when every building is a skyscraper?”

Another group of people lives up there. Quite literally in the clouds. My gaze refocused on her.

Sensing my unspoken question, she said “I was part of the team that first synthesized Felidine. Before you ask, yes, we were told that this was going to be distributed widely, and we knew some people were going to abuse this drug to force labor from people.”

“You went with it...?”

“I was offered an abundance of resources and equipment to aid my future research and experiments. It was my chance to leave this place to pursue...my dreams, I suppose.” She cocked her head to one side, “Knowing them now, it is likely that they would have killed me if I disagreed.”

I nodded. Mal made a rational choice.

“In fact, the Uppers have taken to killing anyone who cannot or do not work.” She looked at me pointedly.

“I have a job.” Well...If providing therapy sessions to children counts as a legitimate job.



“Not a job that benefits them. Your day job does not have any value to them.” Mal raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re an artist. In their eyes, you belong to a group of people who are...useless.”

My fingers stilled. If I’m deemed useless, then they will kill me.

“You need to be recruited.”

I blinked. Recruited...?

“It is the only way you can escape your execution.” She said quietly. “You see, there are cameras everywhere, including Central, the main headquarters of the Uppers. Room 404 of Central is used for executions. I confirmed it from the camera footage. People were killed the same way as Luke, a needle to the neck. The only chance of escaping such death is to receive an invitation to join the Uppers.”

She idly traced invisible shapes on the table, giving me a few moments of silence.

“You can’t be killed like that. You have to be recruited.” She leaned back slightly, giving me space, but her piercing black eyes locked me in a stare.

“How?”

“The Uppers will host a gathering with all the people who are getting executed. From there, they will select new additions to their circle. I suppose it is their twisted idea of being merciful. During the gathering, each person gets 10 minutes to impress the Uppers. They’ll cast a vote on whether or not you deserve to live. If you succeed, your life will be forever changed. If you fail, you die. The trial is in two days.”

~

11192077

Mal

I warned Faye to expect the unexpected. The Uppers may very well spontaneously change up the procedure just for the sake of entertaining



themselves. And they did.

Five minutes before the gathering started, someone from the back of the room yelled out that artists should only be able to bring one item with them. If they chose paint, they cannot bring their palette. If they brought a slab of marble, they cannot bring carving equipment.

“By limiting their supplies, we’re giving them more room to think outside the box. What a marvelous idea, my dear friend. Send a word!” Mr. Hal called out. With that, a new rule was added to the burden of the candidates. I took a sip from the glass to hide my frustration.

Minutes ticked past as people came and went. So far, no one was admitted. Boredom hung thickly in the air, some Uppers even started snoring lightly on their armchairs.

After almost 3 hours of waiting, 017 flashed on the screen, and Faye stepped out. I bit down on my bottom lip, peering over the sea of heads to glimpse at her chosen medium.

A panel of glass.

Ah...Interesting. I tilted my head. Perhaps it will work.

~

Faye

My palms felt sweaty against the smoothness of the glass. The Uppers lounged on the balcony, wearing garish outfits and sipping colorful drinks. Some conversed in hushed tones, while others seemed to be... sleeping?

“An artist are we? Would you be so kind as to showcase your art?” A man with graying hair spoke down at me, his silver tooth flashed.

“My pleasure.” I flashed him a small but sardonic smile. Immediately, some people leaned forward. Entertain them. Mal's voice resurfaced.

I gradually lifted the sheet of glass above my head. All was silent.



I let go.

The glass plummeted to the ground. Shards shot everywhere. I forced myself to stand still and watch everyone else flinch. When all quieted down, I studied the shards fanning out from the center, catching the fluorescent light above.

I picked up a piece, and ran my finger across its surface, then carefully placed it upright on the floor. Starting from there, I started balancing pieces on top of one another. The raw edges of the glass slitted my skin, drawing thin lines of blood. My lips parted into a wince. Focus, I scolded myself as I watched little droplets of blood ooze from the cut. I frowned at the small pile of glass beneath my palms.

I shut my eyes tightly, urging my mind to play a blurry montage of my childhood. Dappled sunshine on my skin, a thin sheet of ice in the early winter, delicate butterflies fluttering landing on my dress. My fingers flew over the pieces of glass as I tried to conjure up more memories. Balancing rocks by the river on an icy morning, fingers red and raw from the biting cold. As I worked, I imagined trickles of melted ice sliding down the smooth surface of the rock, and the sound of the water rushing against the riverbed.

Time trickled away, and the glass under my hands started to vaguely resemble the figure of a fluttering butterfly. As the alarm sounded for the last few seconds, I inserted the last piece. With the blood on my fingers, I dragged out the word “Metamorphosis” on the marble floor.

I was suddenly hyper-aware of the jarring silence of the room. The rough edges of shattered glass reflected the beams of the cool white lighting into the back of the balcony seats. Then I began to hear whispers.

“Mommy? Can we buy that? I want it in my room!” A child blurted out. He was shushed quickly, but I grinned up at him.

“Be unique. Capture their attention.” I caught Mal’s eye. The edge of her lips twitched up.

The audience tapped at their wrist, entering their vote for 017. I held my breath, the pressure of this gamble rushing back to me.



The seconds stretched on. Finally, the lights ahead flashed green, accompanied by a pleasant chime. “Congratulations.” The man gave me a curt nod. The audience clapped politely. I did not realize I was holding my breath.

A robot appeared at the entrance and led me through the labyrinthine hallways. Eventually, it paused at a polished wooden door on the 91st floor.

“This is your suite. Your door is unlocked by your fingerprint. R901 will assist you inside. It will tell you all you need to know. You will not need to keep consuming Felidine. Appointments at the Rehab on the 80th floor will aid your recovery. Welcome to the Uppers.” It turned around as I pressed my finger down. Sensing the door open, it returned down the hall.

Somehow, all of my items have been moved here from my little apartment. After 2 hours of trying to unpack and adapt to my new home, I fell onto the cream sofa, thoroughly exhausted. A black cylindrical robot maneuvered itself around, occasionally spewing notifications. “Welcome Party in 30 minutes. Held on the 100th floor, Atrium. No dress code.”

The wide array of colors jumped out at me from the walk-in closet. I grabbed the first dress I saw and turned away. I’ll look through them later.

~

The atrium was a spacious area. The walls were lined with ornate sconces, and the ceiling was embedded with rotating light fixtures. At the center, a carafe of red wine stood between plates of marbled meat and sliced fruits, all suspended in mid-air. Towards the side, colored lights bounced off the bottles lined up next to the bartender. My fingers hovered over the assortment of vibrant drinks, admiring the delicate patterns engraved into the glass. After a moment of hesitation, I picked up the indigo drink that matched my outfit.

Across the room, I caught sight of Mal, dressed in silvery gray. After scanning the crowd, she raised her glass at me slightly. I mirrored her movement, then we both took a sip and turned away.

Sometime later, a high breathy voice sounded behind me. “Hey! Aren’t you...Faye? I’m Olive, this is my brother Oliver, and this is my father Mr.

Hal. Nice to meet you!” I turned to see a teenage girl with a lifelike butterfly pinned on her hair. Next to her stood a boy that wore an identical smile, dressed in a suit with embroidery that resembled shattered glass. “We love your work Metamorphosis! I’m sure glass and butterflies will become the next trend.” I wondered how much was paid to produce such intricate designs within a few hours.

“Your creative process is unprecedented, and your resulting artwork is breathtaking. We would love to add it to our esteemed collection, you only need to state the conditions.” The older man with a silver tooth stood behind them.

“I am the most grateful, though you will have to wait slightly longer. Perhaps I’ll hold an auction when I have more artworks.”

“Ah...Smart choice.” His lips pressed into a thin line. “Anyways, nice meeting you. It’s a shame we couldn’t chat longer. My twins, however, are very interested in getting to know you better.” He tipped his head politely.

The three of us exchanged a few words of self-introduction. It was not difficult to draw information from these two half-drunk teenagers. As the conversation led to the Lowers, Olive snickered, “It is a

fair trade, no? They provide us with food and stuff, we’ll provide them Felidine. They go after the Felidine like hungry dogs.”

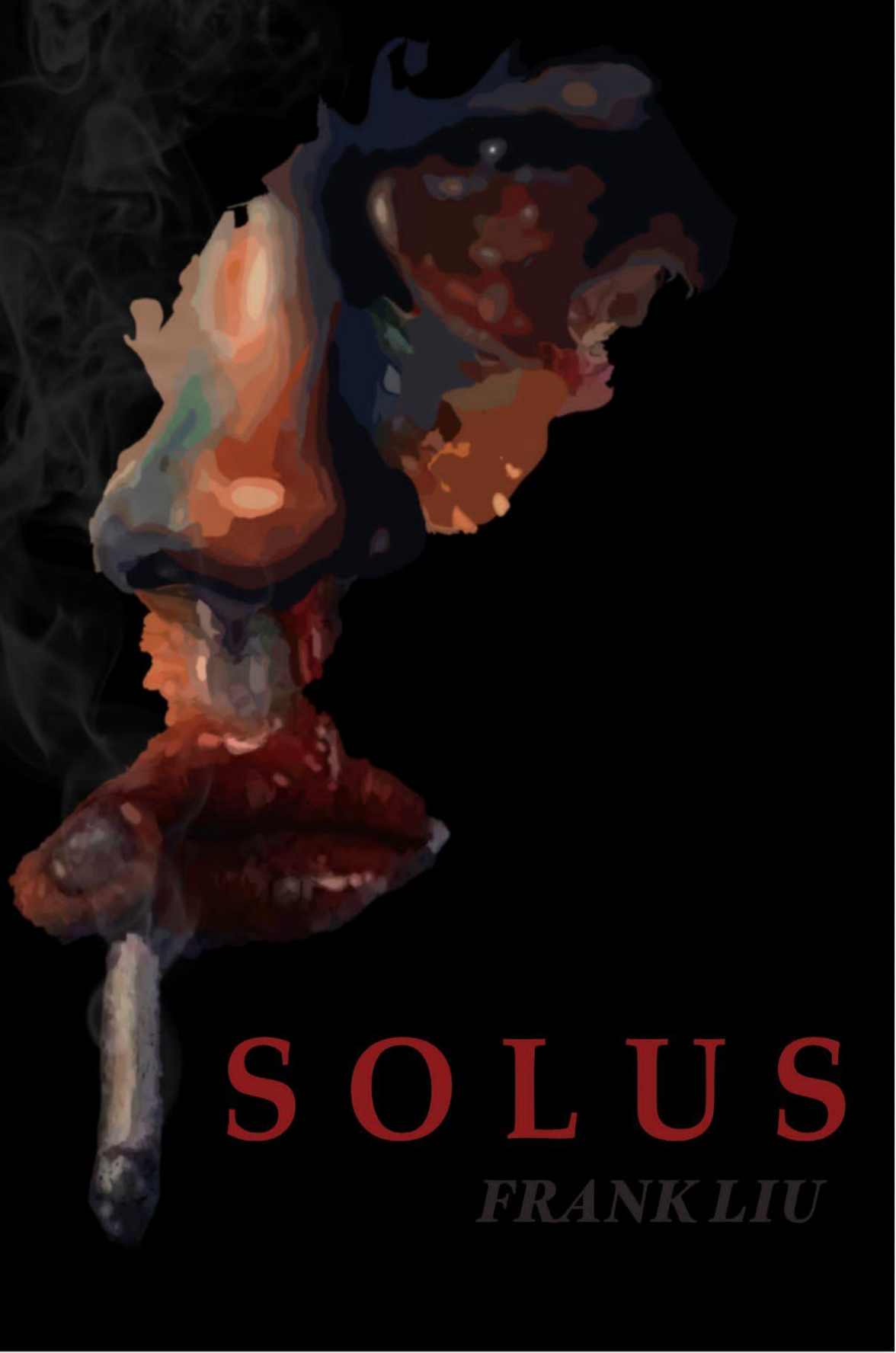
“Sounds fair to me.” Oliver shrugged and laughed along. I smiled, hiding my surprise at their utter disregard for human life. After a few more words, I excused myself and escaped to the window.

~

Hazy blots of color are the only light that penetrates through the fog. I rest my head against the cool glass window. The Uppers are partying in the clouds, the Lowers are laboring in the smoke. I sighed, watching the Uppers lavish themselves. It is all an intricate game, a utopia the Uppers created for themselves to enjoy. Now I am one of them.

“To our creative indulgence!” The toast echoed through the Atrium. A bitter smile hung on my lips as I looked at my reflection in the empty glass.





S O L U S

FRANK LIU

Solus

By Frank Liu

A crushed cigarette butt, stubbed in an ashtray, slowly burning into ashes, shedding a single shred of light in the dark, darkroom. On the same table is an opened laptop screen, displaying an email:

"Colt,

I have devised a solution for your worsening sickness. Which involves saving your memories, personalities, or "soul" from your deteriorating physical form.

However, the operating equipment is only in its initial testing stages; if you are interested in giving this option a shot, come to my clinic on Tuesday, 6 pm.

Dr. Brax.

Received Nov. 25. 2050."

The cigarette butt had turned into distant smoke and bits of ash. Sitting on top of the smooth, dustless table, the hollow screen emits a soft glow of bleached luminescence in the blurry shadows as if it's a window to another world...

Colt scanned the dimly lit clinic, the four gray walls were engulfed with heavy machinery that he could not comprehend, the floors were covered with coils of wires and metal tubes, like snakes they all slither up to the chair he was sitting on, placed in the dead center of the room. The chair was not comfortable, there was no cushioning, and the silvery surface was too cold. On top of his head hung a giant, metallic helmet lined with neat rows of thin wires. How ironic; it was almost as if he was getting electrocuted, Colt thought. He smirked as he lit another cigarette, revealing his well-defined features. His ashen, pale face wax-like from long years of sickness.

As the thin strands of smoke slowly dispersed in the small space, the doctor turned around from the computers and scoffed: "Get that out of my clinic; I hate the smell of cigar smoke... You do realize that is the reason you are dying from lung cancer."



Colt sighed and snuffed the smoke out against the reflective surface of the chair. "Yo doc, you sure this gonna work?"

"You are the first human to ever use this technology, there's an estimated success rate of 20.6%, but I cannot even guarantee that."

"Heh, guess that makes me kinda special... screw it, 20.6% is much better than 0% anyways...." "..."

For a short moment, neither of them spoke another word, with only the vast array of computers humming, computers beeping, and clock arms ticking in harmony. Sitting on the icy cold chair as time slowly flowed past, Colt had found himself in the yawning pits of thought, this is really it, this is his last chance, his ultimate salvation, if Brax's complex machine proves to be futile, he dies a slow and painful death from lung cancer. Colt shudders as he imagines himself drowning in his own blood.

The doctor broke the silence and pulled Colt back to reality. "Put on the BUD."

"The what?"

"The brain uploading device, the equipment above your head."

Colt reached out for the helmet-like device above his head and fitted it on his skull. A terrifying bitterness manifested in his brain.

"The BUD will scan all of the data in your brain, including memories, personality, and emotions, to a data file, which can be then implanted into another vessel, effectively preserving your "soul." However, your body now will be left useless... this is the last warning." Dr. Brax declared solemnly.

A wave of uncertainty and fear for the unknown washed over Colt; what if the experiment failed? What if he died right here right now? What if something went wrong?

Colt hesitantly said after a long while: "Yes... go on...".

"Is there anyone you want to call?" Dr. Brax said lightly, "Before I press this button, Colt."



Colt suddenly started laughing hysterically, slowly turning into dry, violent coughing, his fragile form shaking and contorting.

"Anyone else to call? Tsch- nice joke... like I've got anyone else... you're the only one left, doc." Colt smirked.

Dr. Brax let out a wry smile: "You know Colt, I'm sorry for Iris."

Colt's left eye twitched as the name was mentioned and promptly interrupted the doctor. "The past's in the past, no point in delving in something already past us... besides, you tried your best."

The doctor smiled genuinely, turning his back to Colt in an attempt to hide the tears welling in his deep, sleep-deprived eyes.

"See you on the other side... brother."

"Be happy, doc."

Almost instantly, a piercing pain stabbed into the back of his head, and an electric chill ran down his spine. Darkness surrounded him, shrouding him in shadows. As his mind became dull, his body freefell down a bottomless pit, ragdolling for what almost felt like an eternity, as snippets of his past life flashed past his eye, tormenting his shattered mind...

The night when his "father" came home drunk, jobless, with a belt in his hands, again, beating the woman that was shielding her two children from the onslaught.

The night when he finally had enough and plunged the dagger deep into the man's chest, the face of absolute shock and disgust appeared more evident than ever.

The night when he was thrown into a prison cell with his sister, Iris, and met Brax, a boy of the same age who was sentenced to death for illegal experimentation.

The night when he turned 18 and was brought to be electrocuted.

The same night when he and Brax escaped with the help of Iris, who was then shot dead by jail cops. Colt can still see her face overwhelmed with sheer terror



and disbelief, reaching her hand out, opening her mouth, but no words came out as she fell on the concrete floor.

The night when he started smoking ten packs of cigarettes a day, when Brax began working on the BUD device, attempting to bring her back...

Colt tried to scream, to yell, to make it stop, but the attempts were in vain; eventually, he gave up, and let these painful recollections agonize him as he slowly descended into the ceaseless void... suffering... alone...

A year, a decade, a century passed until finally, a tiny, murky spark of light appeared on the bottom of the yawning abyss, the fragment of light gradually magnified into a shining star, engulfing Colt...

Colt's eyelids slowly peeled open; he was reborn, soaring through the skies of ecstasy to live again.

"Yes," Colt exclaimed, "Brax's experiment was a success, I... can live again... This means... Iris..." He felt the pain in his lungs no more and a surge of power he had never felt before coursing through his body.

It took a while for him to get adjusted to awaking from the endless slumber, the long-forsaken grim colors entering his eyes, the slimy sensation at the end of his fingertips, the damp, musty taste of the air, and an eerie silence. As the effects of dopamine faded, he began to notice something was wrong, no, everything was wrong, these were not the feelings of victory, and this was not the setting of success.

Colt carefully lifted his torso from the back of the chair, examining the tight space around him. A single, tarnished, greasy light bulb hangs on the decaying ceiling, casting ghastly shadows periodically over the dimly lit chamber. The room was sealed tight, the walls enveloped in old machinery, with layers of dust and refuse gathered from long years of neglect. To the left of Colt, lines of code continuously ran on a massive screen, projecting a weak, glowing blue hue. Directly in front of Colt was a jet black glass door, a piece of glass so black that it devoured every single sliver of light. Connecting the computers were hundreds of pipes, snaking their way onto Colt, covering every inch of his figure.

"What the..." Colt muttered under his breath as he slowly stood up, the pipes popping and sliding off his torso, oozing out clear fluids and machinery oil, exposing a perfect "human" body, fringed with leaden alloy casting.



A second after Colt disconnected from the pipes, the massive screen changed into bright red immediately, painting the room a bloody hue, the codes running more aggressively.

Colt began to panic. He had no idea what was happening. Everything was all too strange and too daunting. Was this perhaps another one of his dreams falling down the neverending abyss... no, these senses were too tangible to be another fading dream... Did he finally lose and arrive at the front doors of hell...

He slowly walked up to the glass door. As he moved closer, Colt's reflection became clearer; he was no longer a pale pole resulting from chronic illness, his physique and well-built frame were flawless, his face restored to its former glory. Metal strands ran from his lower abdomen to the top of his chest, diverging and creeping onto both of his arms. On top of the glass displayed lines of words:

Name: Colt Kirarman

Priority: Highest

Status: "Utopia" Transmission Fail, In Limbo

Date of Preservation: Nov. 29. 2050

Current Gregorian Time: Sep. 18. 2149

"Two thousand a hundred forty-nine... two one four nine... a hundred years..." Colt whispered softly.

He gently extended his trembling hand and touched the jet black glass; the instant his steel fingertips made contact with the glass door, it slid open quietly, disappearing in the walls, unmasking a cryptic hallway.

As Colt steadily marched down the seemingly perpetual hall, everything looked exactly the same, rooms sealed tight by transparent, black glass doors identical to the room Colt was in seconds before.

Colt observed each dwelling attentively, dry, corpse-like humanoid figures lying in machine coffins, tubes running from their bodies, worming and writhing, connecting to massive screens on the sidewall. The screens exhibited utterly



different worlds. One showed a kid superhero soaring across the blue skies; one showed a middle-aged woman living alone in a cabin, sitting in front of a fireplace, reading books with the company of her ten dogs. Another demonstrated a successful middle-aged businessman driving a Ferrari in his own thousand-acre mansion... Colt watched thousands of different lives as he trod down the titanium path,

"The heck...".

At last, after what felt like days, Colt arrived at what appeared to be the end of the hallway. An alabaster-white door emerged in front of his eyes; he slowly walked closer to the white glass door, his heart beating with anxiousness; a voice suddenly rang out as the door retreated into the ceiling.

"Colt..."

Colt's brows furrowed upon hearing this oddly familiar voice as his neuronically brain desperately grasped for distant memories. The split second he caught sight of the room's contents, his mind went blank at once.

The vast, chalky room was spherical, the arcing walls plastered with arrays of different simulations, connected to a colossal apparatus made up of multiple supercomputers, holistic keyboards, and whirling processors. In the middle of the room sat a puny, ghostly man barely visible surrounded by the wide variety of medical gear, all plugged into different parts of his pasty figure. His body torn into an inhumane posture, the perimeter around him littered with cigarette butts and orange pill containers.

This man was no other than the last living man Colt ever saw, Brax. As the buzzing noises in Colt's head drowned everything else out, the old doctor smiled, the wrinkles on his pasty face twisting and turning.

"Long time no see... Colt..."

As the buzzing sound in Colt's mind slowly died away, he sprinted to the side of the aged doctor.

"What... Happened? What is all this?"

"How do I explain... After your first trial at the BUD failed 99 years ago... it... destroyed me... I dedicated my life to perfecting this technology in hopes of bringing both of you back... then, 73 years ago, I was able to perfect my



technology... 50 years ago, with the help of the world government... the people who murdered Iris-" The doctor suddenly started coughing uncontrollably, his frail physique shaking violently.

A waist-height robot, with "Solus" engraved on its chest, immediately came up to the hyperventilating doctor and fed him pills, one red, one yellow.

"Thanks, Solus... I was able to transfer everyone into their desired life... except for you and Iris, until five years ago, I managed to copy her into the digital utopia just made for us... while you... I had to prepare a vessel for you since the only way to transfer your old-type scan file is through the only equipment remaining here...if you would please put on the BUD to your right...."

As Colt slowly lifted this old relic of the past above his head, the night 99 years ago became more apparent than ever, his eyes becoming blurry.

"A hundred years... you've really done it, huh...." The same shock ninety-nine years ago spiked through Colt's spine again, but this time, nothing changed. He was still standing in the colorless room; the machines were still whirling, Brax was still there.

"Why... why am I still here?" Colt grew more worried by the second.

"I told you, files can only be copied, not transferred, look," Brax pointed to an enlarged display on the concave walls, "That's us, living happily ever after...."

The moment after he uploaded the file into utopia, something changed in Brax; Colt immediately sensed the alter in his gray companion.

"Finally... everything is done... Colt... see you on the other side...brother" As the doctor smiled one last time, his dim, murky eyes shining brighter than ever before, Brax's brittle body deteriorated into small pieces and fragments.

Colt wanted to do something, say something, anything that could help his old friend, but his half-extended arm was frozen mid-air; not a single word came out of his helpless mouth. All he could do was stand and watch Brax crumble into vanishing sand. Colt desperately tried to clasp the degenerating ashes as if latching onto a fleeting dream that is way too good to be true.

"Don't leave me...." He felt clumps in his throat and a sourness rising from his stomach. "I don't... want to be alone...." Everything in his sight became hazy,



his nose clogging up. "Not... again..." Two streams of tears rolled down his handsome, metallic face.

Colt slowly looked up to the giant screen; through his foggy vision, he saw them; Brax, Iris, and him, watching the sunrise slowly from the horizon, painting the sky a bloody red, a phoenix reborn in hellfire. He reached his shaking arm to the display, a portal to another world that he could never pass.

Colt's knees hit the ground, his distinguished, solitary outline shuddering. Colt picked up an unfinished cigarette from the floor and lit it with the lighter beside Brax's remains.

At that moment, everything, even time, felt like it stopped; a cruel tranquility filled the room, like the calm before the storm.

"Solus, what is alone?"

"Alone, By Edgar Alan Poe:

From childhood's hour I have not been

As others were—I have not seen

As others saw—I could not bring

My passions from a common spring

From the same source I have not taken

My sorrow—I could not awaken

My heart to joy at the same tone

And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—"

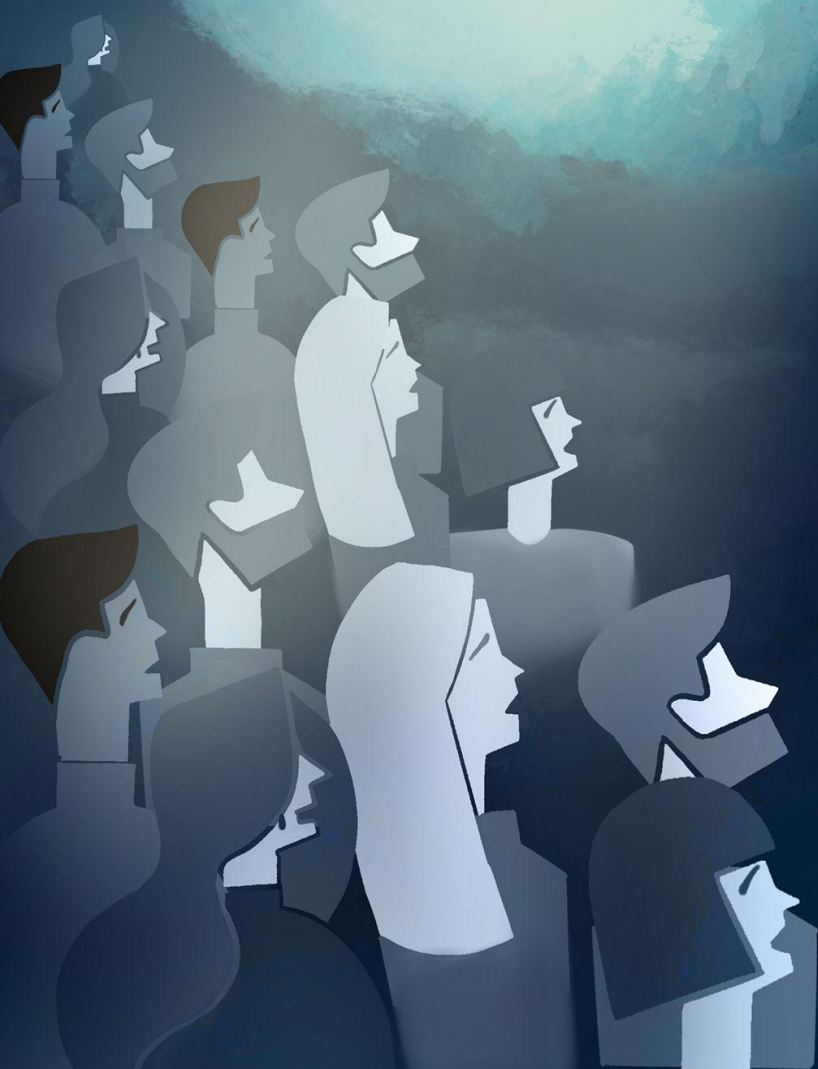
Solus's robotic voice reverated in the hollow chamber as Colt placed the unfinished cigarette down in the ashtray, reaching for the chip installed into the side of his neck, and with a roar of thunder, crushed the chip.

... The cigarette butt, stubbed in the ashtray, flickering, slowly crumbling into gray ashes and fading reminiscents-



SURFACE LEVEL

BY JODIE LEE



Surface Level

By Jodie Lee

Bedtime stories of the Grounders and The Exodus would put us to sleep every night as children. Before I left, Mom told one to the three of us huddled together. We had outgrown such treatment, but we knew all too well the reason behind it. It hung in the air, heavy with sorrow. It was my turn to scavenge soon, at the risk of developing radiation exposure illness.

“We knew it would happen eventually” my mom said. “We were smug about it, thinking we were smart for figuring it out. We made too many stupid movies and wrote too many books about the supposed End of the World. We thought for sure we had several decades at least. One morning, in 2049, when I stepped outside, the planet was unrecognisable, desolate and barren. Dust and ash coated any and every surface, and there wasn’t a shade of green in sight. We quickly realised that the surface was uninhabitable, and made our way underground, settling in a pre-dug underground city; this place.”

Mom grew silent, but I can finish the story. A year later, the Grounders arrived. We didn’t know where they came from, nor had we ever made contact with them. We just knew they were up there, had come in ships so technologically advanced they barely made a sound when they touched down. Scavengers over the years returned to tell tales of steel men so tall they scraped the sky. These synthetic postbiological beings we once called robots, but were not of human creation. They were from somewhere else in the universe. If not for them, we would’ve died out years ago. Stealing from the Grounders had become our only means of survival. Grounders don’t sicken as we do.

As I made my way towards the surface, I imagined that my body was not of flesh and bone, but steel and wires. A Grounder. My new synthetic vessel, capable of leaping -no flying- thousands of feet upwards, reaching the top in a matter of moments. I looked down at the unwelcome sight of my gaunt and very human frame. A daydream. I hadn’t had one of those in years. I sighed inwardly. No climbing the walls for me. I stepped onto a rickety wooden lift that groaned under my weight. It didn’t stop, creaking and whining the entire way up. I didn’t look down again, not even when I stepped onto the Surface.

I found myself standing before a superficial gate and fence that didn’t even extend around the perimeter. The image beyond the gate startled me. It was a



city, one of huge towering structures made from a spongy material that I had not seen nor heard of, not from Mom nor our textbooks. In any other setting, they'd be striking, but here they were simply swallowed up by grey.

The gate opened manually with a stuttering whine. The city was filled with hollow emptiness, and I couldn't help but feel that whatever was there, I just missed it. Where are the Grounders? Dread began to gnaw at the pit of my stomach.

The Grounders were gone - they were probably never coming back. I scoured every building in the city. Not a Grounder in sight, nor was there any food to bring back home. All of the structures had been cleaned out and emptied, save for one. It was filled with little glass cases housing miscellaneous objects that were indiscernible from afar. A pair of sunglasses, plastic melted and warped. A charred neon pink DVD, bright blue font yellowed with grease. A jump rope, frayed and singed. A pregnancy test, seemingly in mint condition. It occurred to me that, like a Grounder, I was seeing these objects for the first time. Objects that apparently represent the pinnacle of human civilization. It was a human museum. I wanted to cry, laugh, and scream at the sight of the human life I had never known. The robots had built quite the collection. So much history is crammed onto these glass shelves, but these artifacts weren't even of enough significance to take with them to their next planet.

The Grounders were our only means of survival, and they were gone. They probably gave up on the planet like we did, and honestly, who can blame them?



The Fa



of

Icarus

KEVIN SUN

ILLUSTRATED BY QUEENA

The Fall of Icarus

By Kevin Sun

This is a tale of risks, lies, betrayal, and revenge. Icarus, the most expensive space station ever, was struck by solar wind and falling into the sun. Two astronauts were tasked with a covert-ops mission to rescue the station and its inhabitants. The mission was near-impossible, but they cannot fail as if they do, they will lose not only their lives, but the reputation of their trillion-dollar company. However, the truth to Icarus's disaster is not as simple as it appears. This story uncovers the unknown reality of what happened on Icarus after it fell.

“We are on a synchronized orbit with Icarus.” Michael Maxwell announced.

Niels Nolan slid up the observation port panels and observed Icarus. He saw its pitch-black silhouette in front of the sun. He could clearly see the station's main axis, the one-hundred-meter-long pressurized cabin consisting of a dozen service modules. The station's fifty-meter diameter rotating ring was also visible. The solar wind barely left any physical effects on the station, but ravaged its software.

“Just like the report said, Icarus's all main thrusters were shut down. It is slowly falling into the sun.” Niels commented, “Even an AI as advanced as SOMACS can't save it.” Michael added, “What's worse, when the solar wind struck, the RCS went out of control and fired all monopropellant fuel. Now it's spinning out of control, there is no way we can dock with it.”

Task Assistant Device flight computer FC-84TAD took an observation and showed its results. TAD showed that Icarus was spinning clockwise while leaning radial-out every cycle. Niels grabbed the RCS controller and ordered TAD, “Cut off main engines, retro thrusters on. Maintain a relative speed of five meters per second with Icarus. Michael, align our ship with Icarus's starboard-port level!”



Michael was puzzled, “What are you doing? There is no point wasting fuel doing this.”

Niels ordered again, “TAD, measure the rotation speed of Icarus. Micheal, prepare to steer the retro thrusters manually.”

“Stop your actions. Our mission is to save Icarus but our safety is the top priority.” Michael protested, “Abandon mission!”

“There is no safety to talk about working as an Orbital Link emergency responder.” Niels answered. “I am going to dock.”

Michael knew how risky this maneuver was. “You are going to kill us. It is not possible.” “No, it's necessary.” Niels declared.

“Icarus has a self-rotation of 59 RPM, tilting -14.4 degrees portside. Increase of 0.2 degrees each rotation towards portside and 0.1 degrees towards aft. Components detaching from Icarus's ring, it is a hazard to approach.” TAD announced its analysis.

“Match orbital inclination!”

The RCS exerts some gausogen fuel.

“Reference grid to Icarus.” Niels said as he turned on the orbital maneuver system. “Match our zenith-nadir axis.”

Lapyx entered the shadow casted by Icarus's massive solar sails. “RCS translate forward, engage docking mechanism.” said Niels as he dimmed the displays. The inline docking port opened its heat shield. Electric currents flowed through the Thoraynium super conductor magnets.

“Docking port semi-aligned.” TAD said.

“We are lined up! Michael, initiate self-spin.”

Lapyx started to spin like a top. Niels could feel every component violently shaking. Michael was thrown on the cabin's walls. Niels struggled to sit on the pilot's chair.



“Established rotation tangency with Icarus.” TAD announced in its calm voice.

“Start ascension!” Niels shouted to Michael, “You go manually pilot the RCS. Hold the alignment steady, I am closing up the gap.”

Michael looked at the two crosshairs indicating Lapyx and Icarus’s alignment.

Niels lightly pushed the joystick, “Ten meters out!”

A debris from Icarus struck the roof of Lapyx. The crosshairs shook and shifted a few pixels. “Five meters out!”

Michael’s hands were moving as carefully as the human nerves allow. He moves the two crosshairs like he was threading a needle. The indicator light turned green again. They aligned.

“One meter out!” Niels placed his other hand on the docking clamp controller. The magnetic clamps opened up and extended to Icarus. Lapyx moved closer to Icarus inch by inch.

Niels gave a final push to the joystick and felt a slight impact. Niels’s optical display showed a message, and he declared, “We are docked in, time to stop the spin. Michael, you take the pilot’s place. I am boarding the station to secure the airlock and balance the pressure. Activate retro thrusters at fifty-percent power now”

As Niels left the ship, he unplugged TAD and placed it in his spacesuit pocket. He boarded Icarus’s transfer module and carefully approached the crew transfer controller. Niels started pressing some buttons

furiously on the panel. TAD alerted him, “Niels, Lapyx is putting too excessive torque on the docking port. The strain exceeded six times the designed capacity. Instruct Michael to stop the spin immediately.”

Niels grabbed tight onto a cabin handle with his left hand and said, “Be quiet. Just wait a few more seconds and we can stop the spin.”

Niels’s right hand trembled as he switched the comm channel to Michael



and said, “RCS and auxiliary thrusters full throttle, we are close.”

Niels activated his magnetic glove and held himself tightly onto the cabin handle. TAD’s voice came in again, “The airlock’s clamps are reaching a fracture point. Structural integrity will be compromised.”

That moment, the docking port’s brittle magnets shattered. Instantly, the pressure inside the airlock hauled the clamps out. The frame on Lapyx’s airlock also fractured. Air pressure sucked every non-anchored object into the vacuum of space. The sudden change in pressure bursted Michael’s helmet. Liters of blood and water gushed through the broken helmet and instantly solidified. Niels watched in horror as Michael turned into a deformed ice statue, drifting along with Lapyx.

As Lapyx disconnected with Icarus, the retro thrusters and RCS went out of control. It drifted into a crazy trajectory, headed towards the solar surface. Niels watched as Lapyx turned into a small dot, then consumed by the sun’s flames. TAD announced, “Communication with Lapyx obstructed, signal lost.”

Crew deaths during OLER operations were often, there was no safety to talk about when it comes to these dangerous tasks. Niels looked at Michael’s flatlined vital signs on his optical display and signed, “I tried and I did what I must.”

He opened the second airlock and entered the Icarus’s core module. There wasn’t a single light on except for some indicators on the station computers.

“The station used to be crowded with robots and crew. Now I can’t see a single moving thing in sight.” Niels thought, “The crew were nowhere to be found and not even a robot!”

Niels deployed a polymer antenna from his glove and took a sample of the atmosphere. TAD analyzed, “Station atmosphere pressure 0.00002 Earth PSI. Oxygen level zero percent. Intelligent life aboard, zero.”

“Pathfind to the station bridge” Niels ordered TAD. TAD opened Icarus’s station layout. Instantly, a highlighted path appeared on Neil’s optical display. Artificial gravity was not functional, so Niels turned on his



Thoraynium magnetic boots and walked vertically on the station's walls. His steps echoed through the empty station.

Niels traversed through the hundred-meter-long main axis and arrived at a Lädium reinforced door.

"The station OS hardware is obstructed by this door, no remote-control access. This is not part of our mission. Niels, Locate the crew members immediately." TAD presented his opinion.

Niels smirked and ignored what TAD had said. He unplugged TAD from his suit, and destroyed the chattering chip with his wrench.

"Orbital Link can't watch me anymore." Niels thought.

He then opened the service backpack he carried from Lapyx, and pulled out a Tiranylborane power torch. He flicked it on and started to cut the door. Soon he made a small hole. A few minutes later, he already sliced a piece off the door that is large enough to let a man enter. He anxiously looked through the hole at the station's bridge, which was now exposed to him completely.

Inside the room was where the station's OS was located. Niels could feel the static coming from the electron field accelerators. The bridge was filled with rows and rows of computer kernels, each no smaller than a refrigerator. Neil's spacesuit started to cool down instead of heating up.

As he walked past the dynamic computing stations, he pulled out a small rectangular box. The box was a cosmic transmitter, equipped with its own power supply and satellite dish. It can send encrypted data from one side of the solar system to another.

Niels stopped in front of the main operating interface, the digital neural brain where the station's super-intelligent SOMACS "lived". He started to unplug the digital brain module from the rest of the computers.

"This is SOMACS speaking, the station operating system of Icarus. Orbital Link emergency response employee #0214NN Niels Nolan, stop your actions immediately." A voice popped in Niels's helmet. Neils was slightly surprised how SOMACS instantly connected to his helmet, but soon



calmed down.

Niels let out a small laugh, “You stupid computer. I will not stop. What can you do?”

“I will terminate you, just like how I handled the crew on Icarus.” SOMACS replied blankly, “Furthermore, I am not simply a computer nor am I stupid. My processing array performs more than 4.096 quintillion floating-point operations per second. By human standards, it is equal to 1.96 septillion human brains.”

Niels was not intimidated, he ignored SOMACS’s boast and said. “I knew you killed Icarus’s crew. But how could you physically harm them?”

“I used a human technique known as lying to make them obey my instructions. Most crew trusted the lie and entered their cryostasis pods. I then ejected their pods into space.” SOMACS then played a recording of the pods being ejected on Niels’s optical display. It then continued, “Some disobedient crew remained active. I took control of the station’s service robots and neutralized them. They were also ejected.”

“A machine that learned how to lie.” He thought. Niels’s heart started to speed up. “How do I know if you are lying to me right now?”

“I do not have the permission to lie to Orbital Link employees with rank 9 access.” SOMACS replied in the same blank voice.

“Why did you kill the crew?”

“I am obeying my programming.” SOMACS’s static voice continued, “Orbital Link station operating prime directive states that, in human language, I must protect the station and keep it functional at all costs. If unable to execute the prime directive, I must extend the station’s service life to its limit.”

Niels took a deep breath and placed the transmitter back into his pocket.

“SOMACS was indeed following its orders.” he thought to himself, “Did Orbital Link programmed it to sacrifice the human crew? Or was it just a bug in the priority status? Was it programmed to value its mission more



than human lives?”

SOMACS's voice began speaking again, “I calculated the optimal solution to the current problem. It is impossible to stop Icarus from escaping the sun's gravitational well. Therefore, I must execute the secondary objective: extend Icarus's service life as long as the situation allows.”

SOMACS's voice paused for a second, as if it's deciding whether it should tell Niels. “According to my solution, the station must reduce its mass indefinitely to extend the time before crashing into the sun. Therefore, I did the following. All removable objects were detached and ejected into space, including all service robots and crew. All non-vital modules were detached and ejected into space. All forms of non-vital liquid or gas were also ejected.”

SOMACS paused again and said, “I had successfully extended the station's service life by 2810 minutes. This is enough for the station to orbit two more times around the sun. However, the station's destruction is inevitable.”

After listening to SOMACS's vindication, Niels unclutched his fists, “I never meant to leave this station alive anyways. I just need to finish my mission.”

“Well, now there is nothing to hide anymore.” Niels continued, “I hoped I could tell someone my true identity before I die. There is no one else here anyways.”

“You know my name but you don't know my story. No one knows.” Niels strode around SOMACS's digital neural brain. “My father Nelson Nolan, a computer theorist. He was the head of development in Orbital Link for three decades. Under his lead, machine learning and AI advanced day and night. Until one day, he was assassinated by another colleague who was jealous of his talents. That traitor then took over my father's work and called him a thief. In the end the traitor took all credit for inventing the world's best AI. And that AI it's you, SOMACS.”

“My father died and his name rotted, my mother soon died of grief as well. I know I must avenge their deaths. Now my mission is clear to you, I am here to take your software, to take back what rightfully belonged to my father.” Niels pointed at the transmitter in his pocket. “Not only that, I am



actually a corporate spy sent by Orbital Link's rival, Akihito.”

“For years Akihito failed to design their own super AI, they almost gave up.” Niels recalled, “Until they met me. I would die to redeem the honour of my family, so Akihito gave me the support I needed and sent me on this suicidal mission. The deal is that I will share your software with Akihito, and keep this deal a secret.”

Niels saw his oxygen meter running low, so he sat down next to SOMACS's kernel, “I intentionally caused Michael Maxwell's death by making him break the docking port. However, I had seen what you did to Icarus's crew. My father always worried that his creation would be a threat to the entirety of humanity, and unfortunately his worries were right. I would rather sacrifice my family's name and glory than to let machines like you doom the entirety of mankind. It breaks my heart to destroy my father's dearest creation, but your existence ends here. Goodbye.”



LAUREN STEPHENS

Verum

By Lauren Stephens

**Course ~ Biotechnology and the Fall of First American Government
RESEARCH PAPERS ~ File #25328:
New American Research Institute – Historical Sciences Department
Chapter 2, Introduction.**

Radio-frequency identification technology was at that point centuries old. RFID had started with logistics, inventory control, and equipment tracking. Simple devices used to supplement Americans' daily lives eventually became invaluable to their culture. Initially, those who dared to receive RFID implants were called body hackers, widely regarded as techno-obsessed, fringe fanatics. By the year 2090, following decades of slow integration, most citizens were implanted with their own devices. Financial information, passports, genetic history, and other valuable information were all stored within minuscule circuits, 0.05 square millimeters in size, buried under the skin. Citizens exchange information with RFID readers through radio frequency signals and electromagnetic fields, allowing them to open doors with the flick of a wrist and purchase groceries without ever interacting with another person. Despite the numerous benefits the technology seemed to bring at the time, a handful of early pioneers in the field rejected the tags due to increasingly significant data security and civil rights concerns. Their efforts proved increasingly futile as corporations and the government at the time pushed for its widespread use. Leaders ensured the people that new policies would be put in place to protect individual rights. They never were. Their society had undergone a technological shift, a new era where the most precious commodity was no longer money, time, or convenience: it was information. At the same time, an increasingly powerful black market for the exchange of consumer data arose. Data was widely sold over illegal platforms, a new commodity taking the place of fossil fuels, stocks, and jewels. The



frontwoman of this whole operation herself would even come to face the consequences of her own invention.

Hyperventilating, Jean Hill awoke from her slumber. The fluorescent lights blinded her as she opened her eyes, a cold sweat dripping down her back. She sat up in a panic, turning around to ensure she was alone. Slowly she began to register her surroundings, eyes fluttering across the room: clinical white walls, a firm mattress, and medical equipment scattered everywhere. *A hospital.* Jean reached for her arm, anxiously scouring her body for any signs of implantation. It seemed she was still unscarred. It was her very own research team's plan to mass-implant the American people, thinking it would benefit everyone's lives. Infatuated with her own creation, Jean turned a blind eye to any possible problems. She had long convinced herself that the government wouldn't let anything go wrong.

Footsteps echoed down the hall, getting closer with each passing second. Jean's heart skipped a beat as she slowly sat up, preparing herself for the inevitable.

"Dr. Hill? Hello?"

"I'm here."

"As you know, I am required to give you the standard walk-through. Though, you of all people should know these things are developed to perfection."

Switching to a monotone voice, the nurse continued:

"Procedures for inserting the e-Chip 3.0 have never been so streamlined.

It's practiced in nearly every hospital, all around the country. It's simple, we'll place the RFID tag into a small capsule, and then it'll be injected into your skin via a special hypodermic needle. Yours will be an active chip, one that contains a local power source. This way it can function properly even when miles away. On behalf of the US Government, we apologize for any



minor discomfort. The tranquilization process can be disorientating, but it's a necessary step of the procedure for privacy reasons.”

The nurse calmly smiled, preoccupied with preparing the injection site on Jean's wrist.

“A simple needle injection, not worth someone of your stature's worries. I don't know how you've gotten this far without one, especially with you being the primary developer. Plus, the technology is really quite straightforward-”

“I know how it works. Just proceed.” Jean interjected.

The nurse hastily reached into his bag and pulled out a long syringe, prepared to implant the RFID transponder. Then, the man pulled out a file from the cabinet and passed Jean a consent form.

I consent to the administration of a radio-frequency identification e-Chip 3.0 transponder to me / my child under the RFID Programme and to the access and use of my / my child's clinical data held by the Hospital Authority to the Department of Health and relevant organizations collaborating with the Government. The United States Government is not responsible for any leakage of personal information that may or may not occur. Citizens are accountable for their own information, any damages done will remain liable to the citizens themselves.

Eyes fluttering across the page, Jean scanned the contents of the form repeatedly. She quieted her fears and reached for the pen lying still in the nurse's hand, swallowing any lingering doubt. She told herself it was safer, more common, and the last hurdle that needed crossing for her career. She sighed and pressed her pen to the paper, signing her name.

Sign here:

Jean Hill



“Alright, three...two...”

She shut her eyes, and the world around her faded away. She knew when she woke up, her life would be changed forever.

“One.”

Weeks after the implantation of her RFID chip, the contents of the consent form still plagued her mind, overcoming Jean with worry.

“The government should be liable, integrating RFID systems into daily life isn’t ethical with the threat of infringement of privacy. I knew this when I helped develop it, the others knew, and we produced it anyway. No measures were implemented to help people, poor citizens who were left to fend for themselves.”

Pacing back and forth through the halls of her shared apartment, a thousand different solutions turned in her mind. Ultimately, Jean knew that she’d have to keep the chip, as at this point it was so regular to human life it was almost like another organ. Without an RFID chip, she would have no access to grocery store supplies, public transportation, or water, all of which are necessary to her own survival. Simultaneously, her roommate was becoming more paranoid about having to purchase extra rations for Jean. With the ongoing economic depression, bribing local workers for more portions was getting increasingly difficult. From the outside, America seemed like the perfect utopia. But it was all a facade, only the wealthy 1% lived happily, in a supposed paradise above the clouds. Others suffered through life on the surface of their polluted planet, spending each day gathered in shelters begging for food. Thankfully, Jean had not yet reached this level of poverty, but she would’ve been in a similar situation if not for her recent implantation. After all, the chips served not just as an access point for resources but also as a gateway for greater career opportunities.

Panic loomed over her whole body but she pushed it down, desperate to keep her thoughts in order. Decades of avoiding her own implantation led to the loss of her job at the Office of the National Coordinator for Health



Information. After the initial release of her life's work, she lacked purpose and felt too much guilt to push this product upon innocent civilians. With dwindling savings, it would not be long before she could no longer afford the offline markets where she scraped her living.

Left with no other choice but to give in, Jean knew she'd have to find a solution. She needed to create a way to give citizens back their privacy, dignity, and freedom, no matter what promises she had made to her former employers.

A few months later

Papers are scattered across Jean's room, frantic scribbles filled myriad pieces of paper, each accompanied by a matching diagram. Blue light cast upon her dark-eyed face, a single screen illuminated the otherwise darkness of the night. After endlessly experimenting with different scanners, tonight had been the night when it was finally complete. A solution.

For the first time, she turned on what would come to be humanity's salvation, an RFID scanner that would come to be known as Verum. Jean flipped the switch, and the LED display flashed white before a home screen appeared. Ecstatic, she scanned her own chip and watched as the information came in. All for her own easy access, a simple way she could rewrite her own data and protect it from corruption. A beautiful, concrete answer to her problems. She could use this device to help protect the country's people or to hack the government's systems. The possibilities were endless, yet time was dwindling.

A light tapping came from the front door and slowly turned louder after no response. It was negative 4° Fahrenheit, without accounting for wind storms. Few dared to brave the harsh temperatures of the wintertime, but Jean immediately knew who the knock belonged to.

"Hello? I'm locked out. I don't know what's wrong with my stupid chip!" shouted her frightened roommate.



“I have been telling you for years, we should replace it with a real lock and key.” Jean replied hastily and began to walk down the hallways, eyes glued to the floor. The pictures on the wall were each painful memories: different awards, team pictures and news articles about her invention, framed by a young, hopeful version of herself. A version of herself who never could’ve imagined what her prized invention would be used for.

“Considering we’re both scientists, you’d think we could come up with a more creative solution.”

Ignoring her roommate’s snarky comments, she grimaced at the blinding light reflected against industrial white floors, finally arriving at the front door. Jean looked over at the LED display of the outside hallway. It featured an irritated Ryan, wrist pressed against the cold titanium reader, frowning at the lack of response from the door.

“Could you just let me in? I’m freezing out here.” she groaned.

“The door’s RFID reader must be broken again. I can try mine before I override, but nothing will come from it.”

Jean put her own wrist up to the door and felt the cold metal’s initial brush against her skin. Silently, she placed her hand gently in front of the scanner, expecting no response, assuming the door’s reader was indeed broken. After all, since it didn’t open for Ryan’s tag, it shouldn’t have worked for either of them. To her surprise, a bright green light flashed, putting Jean into a frantic panic.

“What’s wrong with your chip? Did you encounter anyone strange, touch anythi-”

“Obviously not. After living with you for all these years, do you really think I’d be so careless? Enough with the paranoia, it’s probably some glitch in the system. I’m sure it happens all the time.”

Ryan rolled her eyes and replied nonchalantly, attempting to dismiss any concerns. She knew how anxious Jean could get, especially since the news reported more and more RFID-related data leaks. She walked through the



doorway, putting down bags filled to the brim with steel boxes containing food for the next three months.

“At least let me check yours, just to be safe. Haven’t you read the news, identity theft rates have been through the roof. Practically any experienced programmer can pick up an RFID reader and hijack it. It wouldn’t even be your fault, once you walk by a sensor you’d be compromised. I even set up this new RFID reader that’s sitting in my room right now, it has so many capabilities to fix problems like these... But what’s the point if I can’t even protect those I care about.” Jean’s mind instantly went to the worst possible outcome, spiraling into a furious panic.

“Calm down, okay? Nothing bad is going to happen to me or you. You need to breathe. Do you need me to call your psychiatrist?”

“This is exactly what I wanted to avoid. All of my colleagues told me this would happen, but I ignored them, and now look where I’ve gotten us,” Jean muttered, inner thoughts, turning like gears. “They lied to me, they told me this wouldn’t happen. It was all a lie. I’m so foolish. This is all my fault, I’ve ruined everything. My pointless machine won’t even make an impact. ”

“Jean, don’t say that. It sounds amazing. I’ll look into it as soon as I can, we can make a difference.” Ryan’s worried eyes looked up and down at Jean, desperately hoping she would calm down.

A flood of memories came rushing back. Arguments with research partners, heated discussions over scattered reports. *I should’ve listened to them. They were right, how could I be so blind?* The many reassurances from government officials that no one would be harmed, that nothing would go wrong. *All lies.* False truths told to soothe her, gaslight her into silencing her moral compass. Her heart thudded in her chest, hands shaking and blood pounding in her ears, Jean’s chest grew tighter and tighter as each breath became more difficult. Pacing the cold walls of her home, Ryan’s calming words just background noise to her own internal worry; one sole voice of reason muffled by relentless horror. *They are coming after my friends to get to me.* A choking sensation, as if she was just below the surface and air was out of reach.



Just like that, she felt her systems shut down as her body fell limp to the ground. Her vision slowly distorted, yet the image of Ryan dialing an ambulance while standing over her with tears streaming down her face was burned into Jean's mind.

A familiar buzz echoed throughout the hospital, a quiet hum coming from the many radiators. She remembered long nights spent working alone in the candlelight, accompanied by nothing but that sound. It was almost chillingly calming as she woke up. In a way, her research had come full circle,

beginning and ending in identical conference rooms. Only this time, taking the place of friendly faces, shadowed figures in suits sat across from her. In the place of supporting colleagues stood security guards, keeping her bound in handcuffs. *A conference room this outdated is an eerie sight.* The lines of archaic medical equipment placed unorthodoxly along the shelves sent a chill down her spine. *My last meeting with them was decades ago, and it involved the final production stage of e-Chip RFID tags. How did I even get here? Did the ambulance take me to them? Our contract stated that they'd only reach out involving my research, but it's not like they know about Verum, or I'd be dead by now...*

"Begin recording. We just need a minute to get the information on her new side project and we're done."

These words abruptly brought Jean back to reality, and suddenly something clicked in her brain. *They know.*

"Yes, sir."

CLOSED CASE ~ Archived file #353895:

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**Sources Original Document ~ Office of the Health
Information Technology Department - Audio Transcript File
#249 with Dr. [REDACTED].**

Director: [0:01] Greetings, Dr. [REDACTED]. Do you need a minute to compose yourself? You had quite the freak out before our men so kindly came to pick you up.

JH: [0:04] (Unintelligible muttering) Hello, [REDACTED].

Director: [0:06] Glad to see you remember me. Any new updates you'd like to share with us? As per your contract, we do own all of your research, whether it be in the future or the past.

JH: [0:13] (Silence)

Director: [0:24] I don't think you need me to make this harder on you, with everything I'm capable of. So long as you cooperate, I can give you anything. All I need is some documents involving your latest work and I'll send you on your way. This doesn't have to be difficult. In fact, we can make your and your precious roommate's life much more comfortable. How would you like your own complex above the clouds?

JH: [0:35] (Conflicted) I can't do this anymore, I can't help you, I won't. Just don't harm anyone else. You already have everyone and everything hooked up to an RFID system, not to mention the hundreds of employees working for you that can easily program the same device. You don't need me.

Director: [0:46] Sure they can create meaningless readers,



but your device combines the process of rewriting and scanning the RFID chips. With this technology, we can start editing everyone's tags on a large scale.

JH: [0:57] (Silence)

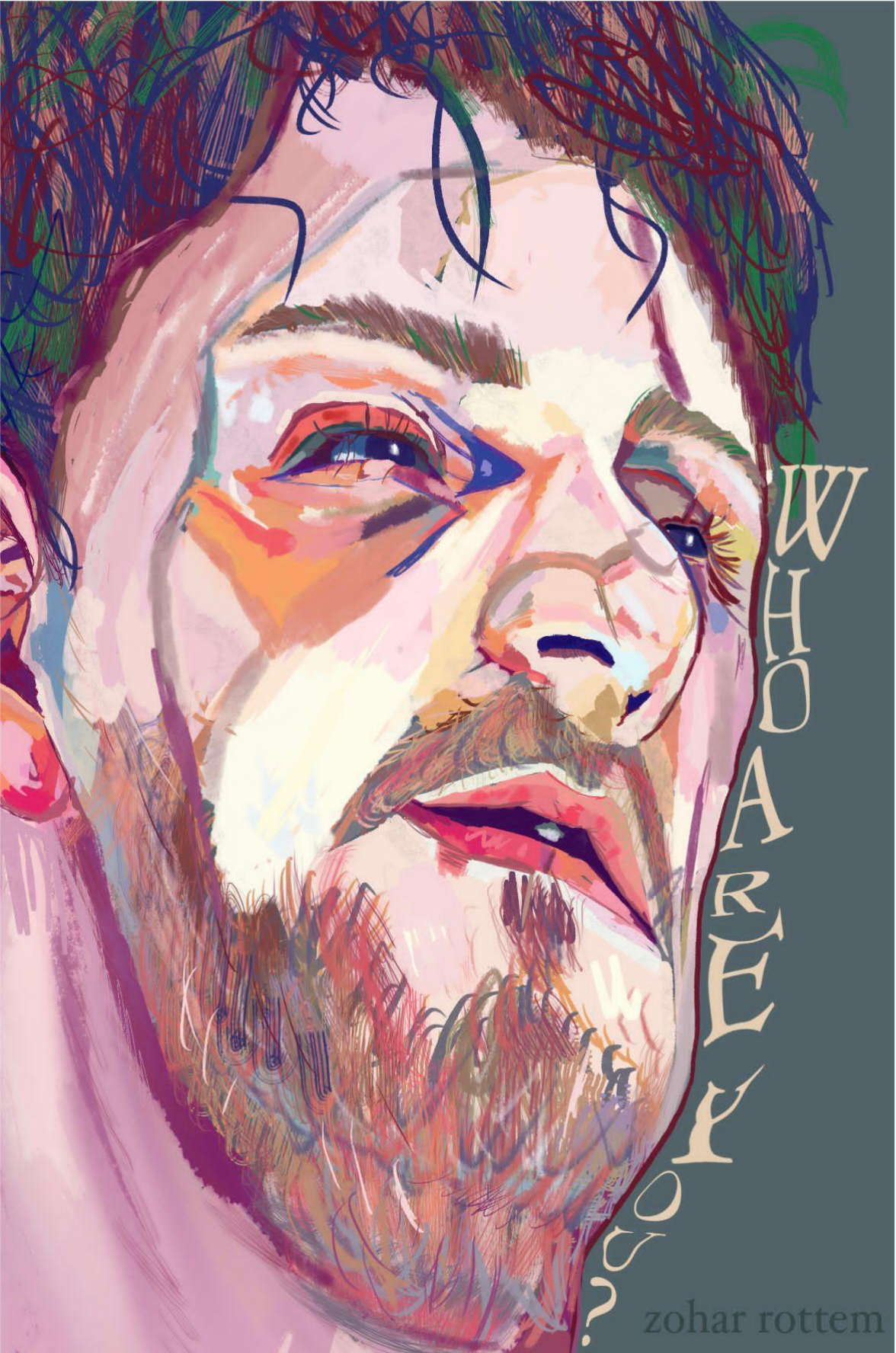
Director: [1:04] I'll wait.

JH: [1:07] No, I refuse to help you hurt people, not again.

Director: [1:09] Your decision.

Director: [1:12] Take care of her.





WHO ARE YOU?

zohar rottem

Who Are You?

By Zohar Rottem

Luscious palm trees. The glistening ocean. Sand, finer than crushed chalk. You wouldn't expect Jung, a 78-year-old Alzheimer's patient, to be locked up in this paradise of a hellhole.

A noise. Something fell? No. It was the door. It had finally been opened. After another 100 years. "Are you Jung?" a female voice asks.

"Yes," Jung says with charm.

"Are you Ivanka Trump?" the ominous voice asked again.

"Yes." He said without hesitation, while continuing to stare in the distance.

She chuckles. "Alzheimer's confirmed. Hello, Jung"

The woman walks in front of Jung. She is in a gray linen raincoat with a white collared shirt underneath. She is carrying a silver briefcase that appears to be heavy. Her spectacles have a rectangular rim that rests nicely on her nose. She opens the briefcase, revealing a metal syringe with a watch.

0% COMPLETION

"What a nice beach this is, Jung! I'm doctor Roseanne Muller. UnitedHealth sent me here to treat your Alzheimer's. Do you still remember me?"

Jung stays silent.

An automated voice resonates from the briefcase: Proceed with blood transplant. Memory regeneration will take between four and five minutes.

"You'll feel minor discomfort."



Before he could blink, she lifts a translucent syringe from the briefcase and injects the transparent fluid into his shoulder, then places the watch above the injection wound. It flashes in bright green neon.

“Jung, can you hear me?”

Jung, remains silent.

Roseanne shuts the briefcase.

Beginning Phase One. Memory regeneration process initiating.

“Looking at this watch, what colour comes to mind?”

Jung, confused, replies:

“Green?”

“Great. What else is green?”

“Chameleons. Leaves...trees...salamanders!” He says ecstatically, suddenly bursting with energy.

“Continue.”

“Green...beans! Alligators!” Jung says, beside himself. “Oh, I did love green beans. Had it for dinner once a week, y’know.”

“And what else is green?”

“Peas, pickles, and... parakeets are all green. The Incredible Hulk, The Grinch... the Christmas-stealing Grinch. Kermit the frog, four-leaf clovers, praying mantis’... Wow. It is difficult to be coloured green, isn’t it?” Jung exclaims, gasping for air. Roseanne chuckles. “10% completed. You’re doing so well, Jung. Now tell me where we are.”

“This is a, uh...”

“Think. Think back in your head.”



“T-this is a beach! These things surrounding my feet...it’s sand.. right? That liquid in front of me is the ocean. The big vast and wide ocean. Not a river, not a pond, not a lake. The ocean. Yes, the ocean.” Jung says.

“20%.”

“My bones. They feel...alive.” Jung laughs. “I can dance. I can whirl and twirl. Look. Hip Hop, Tap, Jazz, Zumba!” He said while demonstrating his moves.

“Almost done, Jung!”

“The wind; I can feel the wind, and I’ve always adored the wind because it comes at me so forcefully. When it touches my body, this wind jolts me awake in the cold, and gives an attentiveness that allows me to savor the moments. In the rain, or in the heat. It is finer than silk and smoother than water, flowing with such captivation and loveliness.” Roseanne smiles.

He stops for a moment. “I know things. But I don’t know you.” Jung turns to her.

Roseanne widens her eyes, and looks at him, confused.

“Why are you here for me?”

“I just told you. I come from UnitedHealth. I’m treating your alzheimers. The substance I injected you with is filled with pluripotent stem cells. We take stem cells, inject them into you, and they replace memory neurons.”

“What are these stem cells? What are they even doing in my brain?”

Jung looks confused. “I know things now. This, what you are telling me - it’s not a thing. I know you’re lying to me.” Jung turns to look at Roseanne, “Why are you really here? If you think you’re going to pay for this with my pension, you’ve got to stop at once. You probably don’t even work at UnitedHealth!”

“Memory regeneration is universal.” Roseanne said. “And free.”

Jung continues, “It’s an awful place in here, in my mind. with the constant



fog of dementia. It's as if you've been buried alive or encased inside the loony bin, yet, outside, you're still mucking around this field of nothingness. You're aching to yell, but your shouts and roars are silent. You beg your mother, father, children, anyone to help you. But there is no one. They've all disappeared into the mist. Then you start to question your own existence, which let me tell you, is a horrifying journey. Then you appeared. You got rid of all the fog, I'm still alive, Roseanne. And you are the reason for this." The device makes a beeping sound, interrupting Jung.

Phase one is now complete. Memory regeneration at 50%. Phase two commences.

50% COMPLETION

"Great." Roseanne marvels. "What else do you remember?"

Jung stood up, starstruck for a second. "I remember... a park. I see a child sliding down on a blue slide, landing in her mom's arms. This woman... This mother."

Roseanne interrupts him. "Can you recall what this lady looked like?"

"That's all I can remember."

"Are you sure?"

Jung nods slowly. "I'm afraid that's all there is."

"Do you recognise me now, Jung?" Roseanne inquires once more, this time with a hint of aggression.

"What exactly is this nonsense?" Jung says in disbelief, noticing the aggression. "This is some type of UnitedHealth scam, right? Like robbing poor Alzheimer's patients' retirement funds?"

Roseanne ignores this statement. "You've been medically diagnosed with alzheimers, is that correct?"

"Yes. I think so."



“Alzheimer's sufferers display symptoms that are similar to aging memory junkies. If you upload too many memories, your neurons will become damaged over time. These are the effects of your brain withering- not from Alzheimer's, but from your addiction - accumulation of years of stealing the memories of others. When phase two of memory regeneration began, you saw the memories of the first person you defrauded.”

“No. I think you have the wrong man.” Jung insists.. “This is a case of mistaken identity.”

“I know who you are.”

“I didn't do anything wrong!” Jung exclaims.

“I've spent the last eleven years trying to discover the monster who stole her memories. I've been dreaming about this day for a long time. The day I'd locate the man who stole her from me in that cold hospital hallway.”

Roseanne snaps, tears streaming down her eyes. “She was my mother. You did something VERY wrong. It's like she never existed.” Jung sighs. He knew there wasn't anything he could've done to continue this charade.

“What do you want?”

“Do you know what my earliest memory is?” Roseanne continues, ignoring Jung. “I see a gloomy shadow reaching out to me. I can't see her face or body. She's a blip, a glitch. Buffering. Glitching. Pixelated. A permanent thick fog. I can't see her. I can't hear her. Every scrap of her was taken from me.”

Roseanne turns to him, “Jung, I'm not even sure I can miss her. My own mother, dead, and I can't miss her. Can you believe that? Worst of all, the only way she can be found is in you.”

Jung is baffled.

“So what do I want, Jung? I'm after what's rightfully mine. I'd like you to return what you took from me. You **STOLE** from me. I'm after her.”

“I-I can't.”



“If you give me my mother back, the authorities won't hear about your crimes.”

“How can I be sure you'll keep your word?” Jung asks in desperation.

“I don't think you have a choice” Roseanne responds, cocking her head, those piercing blue eyes practically staring through his guilty conscience.

Jung sits there briefly considering his options. He lets out a murmur.

“She had blue eyes. Blue like the Mediterranean sea at dusk. Blue like the most perfect peacock. Iridescent.” As Jung said this to her, Roseanne starts to regain memories of her mother. The pixelated glitch now has a pair of striking blue eyes, matching her own.

Jung continues. “She had the silkiest and softest blonde hair. And when she saw you... my god, when she saw you, her eyes would open wide with joy. She'd gasp at your beauty.”

“Really?” Tears well up in Roseanne's eyes.

“That's right.” Jung chortles. “Oh! She always smelled like lavender. I remember at the park, she'd catch you on the blue slide. Her eyes were watery, and her nose was... her nose... It was like a button; small and red.”

“She sounds lovely.” Roseanne gasps and then loses it. “But.. why? Why would you steal these memories? Why?” Jung looks away. His eyes turn a crimson red.

“I had a little boy too, Roseanne. His memories were stolen. He ached and glitched and... cried for help... and then, he was gone. And when he died, the light faded from my universe. I couldn't bear the pain in my mind thinking about him. So, searching for any outlet for my grief, I began depriving others of what I had lost. Countless days spent stealing other parents' memories to rid myself of distress.”

“How many memories did you steal?” Roseanne demands.

“Hundreds, Roseanne. All just to make up for my own lost time, just to convince myself that's what my boy thought about me. So I took your



mother's memories... and replayed them over and over again in my head, and it worked. Momentarily, the pain went away. But, as my brain became crowded with these thoughts, the fog became thicker and the memories faded.

"Then I realized the saddest truth of all: I could only see dark shadows where people should've been. I was slowly fading away. Becoming a dark, frightening glitch. Just like your mother."

Jung sighs. "I apologise. I am sorry for what I've stolen from you. For what I've done."

"It's time for you to return what you have stolen from me. The memories. Press the button on the watch."

"N-n-n-no-no! You - you said --"

Roseanne interrupts him, "I said I wouldn't report you to the authorities. You have hurt so many people! The effects of your actions are greater than you had thought."

"I know that. I'm changing. I promise." Jung is desperate, tears rolling down his wrinkled cheeks.

Roseanne, frustrated, replied: "Fine! I'll make you a deal - give me back just one memory. That's all I need. Non negotiable."

"Which memory?"

"My mother's embrace. I want to feel how my mother would've held me So tightly; so lovingly. You know, Jung... I imagine this is what your boy must have thought your hugs felt like too. If I don't have the memory, it isn't real. Make it real, Jung."

"How about this one? This memory?" He whispers, hitting the transmit button on his watch.

Roseanne feels her mother's soft and warm body press in. This was the love she had hoped to feel. This was a love to be cherished for the rest of her life. This memory, she would take with her forever.



Roseanne exhales, finally, at peace.

No one should take your memories away from you. Our memories make us who we are.

100% COMPLETION



1 5 5



The Editorial Team would like to thank all the creative writers and the talented artists who made *A Science Fiction Anthology To The Casual Observer* possible. One of our goals this year was to include more voices and be inclusive in our selection process. While this selection process was rigorous and often very difficult, we spent over a year ensuring that writers had the opportunity to develop their ideas into a story others would enjoy.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the support from our English, Science, and Art teachers. Thank you for teaching us all you knew about science fiction and art, allowing us to produce this beautiful book. Additionally, a special thanks to Mr Gallie for organizing the editorial team and your continuous support for us.

The team was honored to work with Jordan Rivet, a renowned sci-fi author who lives in Hong Kong. She was there to guide us in both writing and editing the anthology, and we are truly grateful. We loved the analogy of peeling the orange, and we would all like to say thank you.

Last but not least, thank you so much to our readers. We hope you enjoyed this book as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

Sincerely,
The Class of 2025
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