International Scenario
Writing 2007 Champions

Future Problem Solving:
Program International
2007 INTERNATIONAL
SCENARIO WRITING
CHAMPIONS

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The ideas expressed in this publication are those of the students and do not necessarily represent the views of Future Problem Solving Program International or its staff.

In order to represent the true nature of the students’ work, no spelling or grammatical corrections were made to the compositions.
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The scenario writing competition requires a student to write a futuristic story based on one of the current year’s Future Problem Solving Program International (FPSPI) topics. The composition must contain 1500 words or less and must be at least 20 years into the future. Scenarios are evaluated based on their content, creativity, and the author’s personal touch. The top three scenarios per division from each affiliate program may be submitted to the International Scenario Writing Competition.

In 2007, one hundred eight-four scenarios were submitted to the International Scenario Writing Competition: 56 Junior, 71 Middle, and 57 Senior Division. International Scenario evaluation consists of two rounds. In the first round, each scenario is evaluated by three different evaluators and given three scores - rank, total score, and quality. These three criteria are combined to create the scenario’s calculated score. The calculated score from the three evaluators are added together to create the composite calculated score. The scenarios with the lowest composite calculated score advance to the final round and receive three additional evaluations.

Listed below you will find the 2007 International Scenario Writing Champions, with each writer’s school, coach, and affiliate.

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<tr>
<th>Junior Division</th>
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<th>Coach</th>
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<td>1 Hamish Nicholson</td>
<td>Nudgee Junior College</td>
<td>Gail Paterson</td>
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<td>2 Paige Waterstreet</td>
<td>Zionsville Middle School</td>
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<td>4 Brian Click</td>
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<td>Barbara LeMond</td>
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<td>5 Michele Newman</td>
<td>Grapevine Middle School</td>
<td>Carolyn Forbes</td>
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<td>Kris Bauer</td>
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<td>2 Terchan Newman</td>
<td>M.L. King Middle School</td>
<td>Naomi Brantley</td>
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<td>3 Emma E. Watson</td>
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<td>Rebecca Montgomery</td>
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<td>4 Scott Coyte</td>
<td>St. Peters College</td>
<td>Allison-Jane Hayes</td>
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<td>5 Ryan A. Zahalka</td>
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<td>2 Reuben Henriques</td>
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Future Problem Solving Program International is grateful to the following people who gave their time and energy to evaluate scenarios submitted to the 2007 International Competition:

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<td>Erika McLaren</td>
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<td>Janet Wrhel</td>
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2007
Junior Division Champions
Junior Division International Champions

A Genetic Germination
1st Place

Hamish Nicholson
Nudgee Junior College
Australia
Coach: Gail Paterson
Topic: Nutrition

Seeing is Believing
2nd Place

Paige Waterstreet
Zionsville Middle School
Indiana
Coach: Marian Rutledge
Topic: Protection of National Treasures

Forever Young!
3rd Place

Jerrica Branham
Central Elementary
Kentucky
Coach: Tonya Carpenter
Topic: Caring for Our Elders

Superstorm
4th Place

Brian Click
Hong Kong International School
Hong Kong
Coach: Barbara LeMond
Topic: Climate Change/Climate Threat

Spaces
5th Place

Michele Newman
Grapevine Middle School
Texas
Coach: Carolyn Forbes
Topic: Cultural Prejudice
James looked outside at the sickly green gas rushing past the front windscreen of the space plane and was fascinated by the hostile atmosphere of the planet Plutarch. He looked over at his brother Mike, eyes closed and gripping the arms of his chair. The plane was on autopilot to ensure a safe landing. Both Mike and James were strapped into their white gravity recliners anxiously anticipating touchdown. As their plane plunged through the atmosphere shaking ferociously like a blender, James found himself thinking back to his childhood in Africa.

He and Mike had grown up in Kenya as the pampered sons of an English missionary and his wife. Both sons had witnessed the terrible famine that swept across Africa in the early 21st century and had been deeply affected by the heart-wrenching sights they saw befall young and old. After leaving school, James and Mike moved to the United States to pursue their lifelong ambition of solving the food crisis in Africa. While studying at the University of Genetics in Florida, they were both appointed senior positions at the United Nations World Food Program. This appointment gave them the power to allocate funding for their research into genetic modification of food.

However, the brothers’ plans were spurred on by a truly cataclysmic event - the International Drought of 2034. This event drove already dwindling grain supplies to critical levels. James and Mike decided that they were going to solve this famine once and for all. In conjunction with the United Nations, they formulated a plan to solve the famine caused by the drought.

Their research led them to copy the survival techniques of a klingert, an alien creature that lived on the planet Plutarch.

Because of the ferocious conditions on Plutarch, there was not much food to be found. What little food there was grew underground where the klingert had been forced to live. Because of this lack of food, the klingert had developed an exclusive gene that produced extra proteins, carbohydrates and vitamins, allowing the klingert to survive for several months without food.

James and Mike had realised that if the gene could be harvested from the klingert and transferred to an easily grown vegetable, people could survive without eating any other food and famines would be eradicated!!!!

That is why, at that very moment, James and Mike were hurtling through the atmosphere of the most hostile planet known to man.

WHUMPP!! James and Mike felt a sharp tug on their bodies. The space-plane’s parachutes ballooned out above the craft, just a few
hundred feet off the surface of Plutarch. A minute later, the layer of swirling gas covering the ground was sent floating away as the plane settled on the surface. James peered out from the window of the craft and was amazed by what met his eyes. Stretching out in front of him was a carpet of seemingly endless tumbling gas. The colours were simply heavenly, as if the gods had split hundreds of tins of paint. Pinks and purples, vivid greens, yellows and royal blues all graced the scene. The sky, however, was totally different. It was as if some unearthly battle was being fought by storms. Almighty lightning flashes and explosions lit up the sky.

However, Mike and James were not on Plutarch to admire the scenery. Their mission was to capture some klingerts. Mike leant forward and pressed a button to open the space-plane’s cargo doors. Outside, from the plane’s underbelly, came a hiss of hydraulics and a shiny metal box the size of a garage descended slowly to the ground.

With a deep rev, the doors were blasted open and out of them erupted a small foreign-looking vehicle. It was called ...a Wombat. A Wombat is a L.M.R.V (Light Mining and Repair Vehicle) which is designed to dig underground and mine metals or to repair objects in a sub-terranean environment. The Wombat had a slightly cylindrical body the size of a large car ending in a giant drill head. It sported eight wheels and quite an array of scientific equipment housed in the tip of the drill used by the driver to perform tasks underground.

At the controls of the Wombat was Mike, with James in the seat beside him holding a hologram screen. On the screen was a 3-D image of the section of Plutarch they were travelling in as taken by an infra-green x-ray satellite.

“There they are, 3 kilometres ahead, 500 metres below,” directed James to Mike, pointing to a group of red dots that indicated the klingerts where a short way in front of their vehicle.

A minute later the Wombat came to an abrupt halt. As Mike prepared to dig, James surveyed the landscape. The ground was pockmarked with the occasional gas vent or rocky outcrop. With a hum from the two hydraulic rams in between the back wheels, the Wombat’s back end started rearing up into the air so that the drill was pointing into the ground at a forty-five degree angle. The drill roared to life and suddenly the vehicle started tearing through the ground and the view from the windows was replaced by blackness.
After ten minutes of digging, the Wombat stopped. According to the screen, James and Mike were barely a metre from the Klingerts. At a push of a button, a rotating rod emerged from the tip of the drill. As the rod was pushed through the final metre of soil, James activated a camera in the nose of the rod. Suddenly the rod broke through into a sort of mini-cavern. The camera showed that the space was about ten metres high by seven metres wide and deep. In the furthestmost corner of the cavern were about eighty klingerts in a large huddle.

The klingerts were very unusual creatures that could be likened to a small lizard but with only one leg on either side of their bodies. They had large feet for balance. They had a weird looking shovel-shaped trunk protruding from where their nose should have been. Perched on their blue spotted body, were two massive eyes on stalks to proved 360 degree vision.

Mike flicked a switch and out from the bulbous head of the rod sprung a vacuum pipe. The pipe slithered towards the huddle of aliens and with small “wup” sounds, sucked twenty of them back to cages held in the back of the Wombat. With that the brothers quickly retreated to the space-plane where they carefully extracted the klingerts from the cages with the aid of sleeping gas. The incapacitated aliens were induced into a false state of unconsciousness to prevent them from being harmed during the eight-month journey back to Earth.

Their mission accomplished, Mike set the autopilot and both he and James retired to their cryo-sleep chambers.

Eight months later...

For the project James and Mike had used their positions in the United Nations to construct a private scientific complex in Kenya. The complex consisted of living areas for James, Mike and the teams of guards, gardeners and geneticists that manned the complex. There was also launch pad for the space-plane, laboratories for the extraction and implanting of klingert gene and greenhouses in which to grow the seeds to produce the first batch of genetically modified vegetables. Being hardy and easy to grow, the humble pumpkin had been chosen as the vegetable in which to implant the klingert gene.

To extract the gene, Mike injected the klingerts with thousands of nanobots. When they located the gene, the nanobots then copied the genes’ DNA instructions and sent them to a gene-reconstructing computer. The machine used the instructions to create a replica of the klingerts’ gene. James took those replicas and using nanobots, moulded the gene into the seeds of the pumpkins being grown in the greenhouse. The pumpkins were then cloned and the seeds extracted.

They named the new vegetable a klimkin, a mix of pumpkin and klingert.
Over the next few months the klimkin seeds were packed and, over a period of many months shipped first to other parts of Africa and then all over the world. Because of the speed that they grew, and the need for such a food, the klimkin quickly became part of every diet worldwide.

Mission accomplished. Famines eradicated.

One year later...

As James and Mike strolled casually along the dusty road in the middle of the village the two brothers were at one with themselves. Around them, children frolicked playfully under the warm Kenyan sun, delicious aromas wafted through the air as women sat outside their houses in groups gossiping while preparing various klimkin dishes. Even though they had both been nominated for a United Nations Humanitarian Award, the sight of these once desperate people so joyous was, to them, more satisfying than any award.
"Are we there yet? I bet we have walked a zillion miles. My feet hurt," whined the young man to his grandmother. His friends knew him as J. C., but he would always be Jeremy T. Christanson, III, to his grandmother.

As they walked towards the Iraqi War Memorial, the grandmother grasped the boy’s hand in an effort to calm her shaking nerves. She barely noticed the bright blue sky, the fragrant cherry blossoms in bloom or the hustling people crowding the Washington Mall. The three decades since the Great Grand War ended seemed to have passed by in a blur to her. From the moment she parked her Hovercraft XVI four blocks away her heart had been racing. She was finally going to experience the controversial memorial herself.

“You look exactly like him!” exclaimed Granny to the boy.

In his fifteen years, a day didn’t go by that his grandmother didn’t remind him of how much he resembled his grandfather. They had the same hair color. They were the same size. They had the same mannerisms. He had grown very tired of the comparison to someone who was killed in a war that was over years before his birth.

As they entered the great hall the emotions became too much for Granny. She almost tripped over a wrestling trophy that someone had placed in front of one veteran’s holographic image. The vastness of the hall was lost on the two as they wound through the 5,257 holographic images, each one representing a fallen American serviceperson from the Iraqi War. The images themselves were life size, and amazingly lifelike, but they had a ghostly transparency. All of America was represented in these heroes’ images. Holographs depicted women and men of every ethnicity, size, and religion. It was overwhelming to see all the images in the great hall lined up shoulder to shoulder; row after row.

Looking for Jeremy T. Christanson, Sr. was a tough job. Luckily for them the images appeared in alphabetical order.
As they walked past hologram after rhologram they would occasionally see items on the ground next to the image. A Harry Potter DVD, a pair of plastic shoes with holes in them and a crocodile on the strap, a “World’s Best Mom” mug, and a strange device that Granny called an “iPod” all littered the ground.

“I can hardly walk through the narrow path! Why is all that junk lying about, Granny?” inquired J. C.

“Those are mementos that people left for their loved ones. Treasures that hold special meaning to the people involved. When your father, Jeremy, Jr., came to see your grandfather’s hologram, he left a well worn pair of soccer shoes. They used to be your grandfather’s, and your dad wore them when he played. He called them his lucky shoes, and he wanted to return them to his father,” remembered Granny.

J. C. couldn’t believe his ears. He never knew his father or grandfather played soccer. J. C. thought of himself as a soccer star. He sure wished he could have those lucky shoes for himself.

Just then Granny let out a loud gasp and tears rushed down her face as she stood at her late husband’s hologram. She tried to hug the image but her arms passed through the hologram like a cloud. J. C. realized he did look like his grandfather! Sure, the image in the dress military uniform was older, 26 when he died, but they were the same height, and body type. It was almost like looking in a mirror, but J. C. would never wear his hair so short and dorky.

As he rushed to Granny’s side, J. C. tripped over a can of Wolfgang Puck’s Split Pea Soup that someone had left for the hologram next to his grandfather. A note on the can said, “Cody, I know it is your favorite. Love, Madison.”

“It is such a shame that these treasures are on the ground getting dirty, tripped over, or stolen. What do you think they do with them, Granny? Do you think they just throw them out?” questioned J. C.

“I can answer that question for you. Allow me to introduce myself; I am Taryn Smith, Head of the U.S. Parks Department, which makes me responsible for the upkeep of the Iraqi War Memorial.”

Ms. Smith explained that in a typical day twelve to twenty mementos are left at the memorial. This creates a safety hazard, because people are not able to walk around without tripping. Also, perishable items begin to rot and smell up the place. At first the Parks Department did not know what to do. The staff didn’t feel right about just throwing the objects in the trash, but they didn’t have the room to keep the items in place. All efforts to try to dissuade people from leaving objects proved unsuccessful. The Office of Homeland Security worried that any unattended package could be a terrorist action. Something had to be done, but nobody knew what. A committee decided to daily remove all the objects and take holographic images of each item. The holograph would then be made available to living descendents of the veteran if they visited the memorial.
“Hey, what is that slot on the floor? It looks like some kind of scanner with a hard drive,” wondered J. C.

“I was just getting to that part. You are right; it is a DNA analysis scanner attached to a holographic file projector,” informed Ms. Smith.

She explained that visiting family members could pluck a piece of their hair and feed it into the DNA analysis scanner. If it positively matched the veteran’s DNA, the holographic file projector would show the images of mementos that had been previously left for the veteran. Widows of veterans had their DNA also programmed into the system to open the file.

“Oh Granny, we have to see what is in Grandfather’s file!” exclaimed J. C. Before she had a chance to say no, the boy had plucked a hair out of his head and was feeding it to the scanner. A quiet bell rang when the scanner finished processing the hair sample, and the holographic mementos appeared at the feet of the veteran’s image. There were the soccer shoes, a picture of Jeremy, Jr, holding an infant Jeremy, III, and a Starbuck’s gift card. The gift card had the strangest inscription; “Jeremy -- I at least owe you a cup of coffee for saving my life. Thank you, SGT. Hunt.”

“Granny, who is Sgt. Hunt?” questioned J. C.

“I have no idea, but it makes me feel good to know that your grandfather saved his life. This has been a very emotional day. Are you ready to go, J. C.?“ asked Granny.

“Not yet, Granny, and please call me Jeremy now. I want to ask Ms. Smith what happens to the original item after the holographic image has been made. I am sure that perishable items must be recycled, but what about other things, like shoes?” whispered the boy.

“If you want those soccer shoes, it can be arranged. The non-perishable items are stored in a sealed vault. Each veteran has been allotted a 2-foot by 2-foot box inside the vault that can be utilized to store the visitors’ mementos. The vault is located in an abandoned coal mine in West Virginia that had been too polluted to sustain human life, but it is great for storage. The National Guard is charged with the duty of inventorying and protecting all the treasures at the facility. It is an expensive operation, but the money that used to go to oil subsidies now provides funding for this program. With all the lunar-mined radiation fuel at our disposal, there is no need for oil or oil subsidies. A simple request form with proof of DNA can have any item delivered to your door. Do you want to fill out the form?” asked Ms. Smith.

“I sure do! I know that I will play the best game ever with grandfather’s shoes on my feet!” claimed Jeremy.

On the quick hovercraft ride back to their home in Cancun, South Texas, both Granny and Jeremy T. Christanson, III, felt closer to the past then they had in a long time-- thanks to Grandfather Jeremy and the Iraqi War Memorial.
“Hey, Nana,” Peyton hurried across the room to where her grandmother sat peering out the glass bubble that enclosed their living quarters. Quickly, she coded the daily news request into the Nano-cyber Newscreen, and displayed the classified advertisements. “Look, there is a suite available at the Techno Community! You have been waiting for this!” The excitement projected from Peyton because she knew how badly her grandmother had wanted her own life back, but suddenly the look on the aging woman’s face confused Peyton.

Nana Aliza had come to stay with her several months ago when her failing health began to require medications that she struggled to remember. Since moving here, everyone could see the changes in Nana’s attitude. She was depressed and stared out the bubble dome for long periods each day. She was homesick, but not just for her place. “I need my privacy, and my space.” She had told them many times. Peyton knew that the Senescence Apartments were the perfect solution, but now she wondered why this horrible look came across Nana’s face. She remembered learning about this new kind of living in school last month.

The Bio-socialism class she had taken was so interesting, but she didn’t think in the beginning that she would actually need the ideas she learned from this holographic dispatch of new wave living. It was all about taking care of various populations, but Peyton was still living at home with her parents. So, she set out to engage in this experience for very different reasons than she had now. On Thursday, January 14, her plasma assignment board had instructed her to visit the virtual communities offered for the aging. This was 2052, and many advances in elderly care were making headlines. Dreaded illnesses such as Alzheimer’s and dementia were virtually a thing of the past, but aging people still faced problems.

Peyton stepped into the digitizing chamber, keyed in the numerical function and was visually transported to the first of several new aging communities found within her locale. After visiting a couple of the places, she holo-ported into the Senescence Techno Accommodations site, and she was amazed at what she found. Upon her virtual arrival, nanobots greeted her. “Welcome to new-age living. Let us show you the future!” She followed and began to learn what this wonderful place had to offer, and her own grandmother’s situation came to mind.
Each suite was separate and designed to meet the needs of the tenant who would live there. Peyton watched as people, upon arrival, were painlessly injected with nanoscanning microchips that would flow through the bloodstream to collect health and psychological data and send it electronically to the suite’s motherboard. The chips would be left in place to continuously monitor the person. Next, doctors, architects, and technologists would work together to devise the input system that would make the suite appropriate for this individual. In the kitchen, a pulse-o-scan on the handle of the refrigerator door monitored blood pressure, respiration, weight, and body temperatures of the example, a virtual person, and Peyton saw how the information quickly computed to the staff overseeing the vitals. Also, heat activated thermal pads in the floors were able to allow monitors to know whether or not the person living there was moving about the place, thus signaling their existence. The same pads became mobilizers to act as transport from room to room if the tenant needed them to do so. “Wow, this is amazing!” Peyton muttered and thought about how it could benefit her grandmother as well as many other aging people who were now experiencing problems that kept them from living alone.

After she viewed the full virtual tour, Peyton rushed home and explained the whole thing to her grandmother. Nana Aliza had been thrilled, but that was a few weeks ago and now things did not seem as good. The look on her face spelled trouble, and even though Peyton hated to admit it, there had been nothing but trouble since Nana moved into their house. Getting used to a new person around was a task by itself, but when she began to be “another parent” the atmosphere got really sticky. All the sudden, she had another person asking about her homework, telling her to clean her room, and even asking if she had eaten her vegetables! She loved Nana, but things were beginning to get difficult.

“Nana, let’s just check this out. It doesn’t mean you have to make any decisions right away. Our main goal is to make sure you have the quality of life you need to keep you happy and healthy. You have options, and this is only one of them. Staying here is always an alternative, and there are others things we can look into later.” Peyton wanted her grandmother to be content, even if it meant she had to change her own life a little.

“Peyton, I just worry about the newness of it all. Moving into a place like that surely must have its drawbacks. I understand the main goal of the community is to help aging people maintain their own lives, but I am concerned about cost as well as whether or not I will be able to operate such high tech equipment. Paying for this on my limited income may be impossible, and I refuse to become dependent on my children for that kind of financial help.” Nana’s concerns were real, and I hadn’t thought about those things, so I told her we could still go have a look, and those questions could be directed to the landlord teams.

With her new license, Peyton would take her grandmother to Senescence Techno Accommodations in just a few minutes in the family’s aerocraft. She would simply tab in the destination and the car would do the rest, but even high tech travel caused Nana grief. However, after a few minutes of deliberation, she helped her Nana into the vehicle, and the two of them sped across the town toward Senescence. Nana was quiet and thoughtful for the entire ride, but Peyton was hopeful that the trip would be just what Nana needed.
“Welcome to your new life!” Flashed across a holographic billboard just outside the gated community, and mini scenes of the occupants and the activities they engaged in phased in and out on the screen. Nana was amazed. Quickly, Peyton urged the aerocraft forward, and soon they were parked in a space provided for visitors just outside the office portico.

“Nana, just remember, you do not have to make any decisions today, and you don’t have to move if you don’t like it. There are other kinds of communities in our town now that meet the needs of older people, and there are new programs to support families who keep grandparents. We have all kinds of choices, but the bottom line is you have to be safe, happy and healthy.” She thought how she sounded like her mother, and knew she would be proud of her if she had been here, but her work had taken her to another state for the week.

Inside, the executive director took charge. With a wonderful, endearing attitude, this lady led Nana to a suite to explain how everything worked. Peyton listened as the woman told Nana about new federal programs offered by the government that could help with the expense, and also how volunteerism of the tenants who were able also help offset the cost. In the end, Nana realized it was very affordable after all. As they left, Nana Aliza shook hands with the nice lady, and Peyton noticed the look of fear had been replaced with excited anticipation! The Senescence Techno Accommodations had proved to be just what her grandmother had been seeking, and that would make everyone involved happy!
Harry Harrison tapped on the door of the waterfront villa in Miami.

“Who are you?” said a sleepy man in pajamas as he stepped out onto the wet doorstep.

“Major Harry Harrison, United States Public Services Soldiers. I’m here to escort you out of the danger zone.”

“What danger zone? And why are you here now? It’s five in the morning!” grumbled the man.

“Look, there’s a Category 6 hurricane on the way. Did you see on the news what it did to Cuba? Electrottransports hurled like missiles, planes pulled out of the air...You have to come,” said Harry.

“I’m not moving just for some hurricane. We have them every two weeks. This house was built to last,” said the man. He began to close the door.

“I must remind you that under the Weather Safety Decree of 2023, evacuation orders from the armed forces must be obeyed,” said Harry calmly, sticking his foot in the way of the door.

A light rain had begun to fall, and Harry was getting annoyed.

“Do you really want to be killed? I’m here to help. The population must be evacuated. It’s for your own good,” he said.

The man groaned and said “Will you people just leave me alone?”

“Look, if you don’t-” started Harry.

“AHA! Remember the Armed Forces Policy of Non-threatening Behavior? A member of the army isn’t allowed to threaten citizens!”

Harry sighed. Why was everyone so obsessed with legal action nowadays? You couldn’t have a simple argument without the citation of half a dozen laws.
Thunder roared overhead and some lightning ripped down towards a factory chimney across town. Nowadays, thunderstorms could start with the slightest change in humidity, and it was raining almost constantly. Harry stared out at the factory chimneys. They were everywhere now, popping up like mushrooms. And everyone knew they were the source of this weather. But the companies were devising evermore complicated schemes to get around the law, and finally Congress had given up. Harry suspected that they had been bribed, but nobody knew for sure.

Harry looked back to see what the man in pajamas had done, but the door was locked along with all the windows. The major groaned. He would have to report that when he got back to HQ. He flipped open his wrist computer and quickly phoned his colonel.

“I’ve gotten most of the residents out,” he said to the color image of his boss. “But there’s one guy who’s just staying in there. Says his house was built to last.”

The colonel snorted. “He should have seen what that hurricane did to the iron-concrete barracks in Cuba. One piece came down in Haiti.”

Harry laughed along with his boss, but quickly went back to the topic. “How do I move him?”

“Did he lock all the entrances?” asked the colonel.

“Yes,” answered Harry.

“Then there’s not much you can do. If you break a window, you know these people. They’ll turn it into a scandal before you can say ‘Trump’.”

“Yes sir,” said Harry, clicking off the computer/phone.

Harry hiked through the streets, past miles of gridlocked vehicles leaving Miami. Trash and leaves were being whipped into a whirlwind by the coming storm. He had to get to the ziptrain station before the --

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud crash from behind him. He turned to look, and saw a large pile of brown palm fronds that had been ripped off a nearby tree.

“Better get that outta the road,” he said, walking back down the street. “Could get in the way of the evacuees.” He began pulling the dead branches away, piling them next to someone’s garbage can.

Harry stood up, looked around for any other debris—and then froze as he stared at the horizon.

A mountain of swirling black clouds hung in the sky, cracking with lightning and roaring like an angry demon. Mini-tornadoes formed and disappeared in an instant around the huge hurricane.
“Oh my god,” he whispered.

He rushed up to the nearest house and pounded the door. Nobody answered. Harry charged down the street, turning the corner at a speed he hadn’t thought possible.

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He pushed through the forceful wind, up the deserted road. By the time he got to the town hall, the wind was moving like a freight train. The building’s windows were dark. Nobody home. Harry blew open a window with his electropulse rifle. He knew what the colonel said, but it was an emergency.

Inside, the building was dark, illuminated only by the flashes of lightning that burst through the swirling hurricane clouds. He rushed for the basement.

The city hall’s basement was cold and damp. He didn’t care, though. It was made out of sturdy stone, and that’s all that mattered right now. Harry dug through the piles of boxes, knocking paper everywhere, and dove under a pile of Christmas decorations.

Major Harry Harrison waited for the end to come.

As wind howled into the basement, Harry began to wonder. How could these businessmen be so shortsighted? Greenpeace was now a huge organization who employed two out of ever ten Americans. Their “Global Warming Can Be Hazardous to Your Health” posters were everywhere. But no. President Remus was powerless to do anything. Congress was full of greedy industrialists who refused to pass any environmental bills. Lobby groups were paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep quiet. There were even rumors that Evan Nader1 had been bribed by Exxon Corp. to stop running for President and shut his organization down. And he promptly did so, convincing most people that the rumor was correct.

As Harry shoved himself deeper underneath the junk, he made a mental note to join Greenpeace.

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1 Ralph Nader’s nephew. He took over the organization when Nader was assassinated by the FBI.
Four hours later, Harry climbed out and opened the basement door. He stopped dead.

The stone city hall was gone. So was everything else. He was standing on a vast plain of emptiness. The only sign that this had once been a metropolis was an electro-transport lying crushed in the mud a few yards away.

Harry dialed the colonel’s number and began to explain the situation. Then he realized that the voice on the end was just an endless prerecorded loop.

“The number you are trying to reach is not in service. The number you are trying to reach is not in service. The number...”

In fact, the largest intact piece of the colonel’s phone was now lying at the bottom of a lake in Georgia. The rest was scattered randomly around upstate Florida.

“How are we going to survive?” wondered Harry as he stared out to sea.
Slumped in the vinyl chair, I tried to ignore my aching back and force my eyelids into an attentive stare. In the haziness of my daydream I heard an exasperated voice calling me. “Katie!” shrilled my eight grade history teacher. I bolted upright. “Pay attention, I just announced your Spaces Program assignment. You will be living in Iraq for six months and your counterpart, Zenon Ferences, will be living in your house.”

“Great, a redhead with blue eyes and freckles in Iraq, I am sure to fit in.” I muttered to myself.

My teacher added, “Here is your Spaces Pendant. You must wear the pendant always as it will help you fit in.” Before I could say anything in response, she dangled a sparkling necklace before me. The chain shimmered and the pendant was a multi-faceted triangular prism that captured the entire spectrum of color. Despite my skepticism, I felt a shiver of anticipation. I looked at her curiously, but she said nothing else.

During Science, I could think only of the Spaces Program, contemplating the significance of my upcoming adventure. The Spaces Program was not an ordinary foreign exchange program. I was to be immersed in a totally different culture, as was my counterpart from Iraq. I had many preconceived ideas about the life and values of Middle Eastern people – not all of them positive. I was concerned that my comfortable, affluent lifestyle was about to be shattered, and I was not sure I was ready for that.

When the bell rang, I was still mulling over my Spaces’ assignment. My friends, Zac and Natalie, were blabbering incessantly about homework, but I had bigger fish to fry. We simultaneously slammed our lockers, our daily “signature”, and dashed outside to freedom.

We grinned as we jumped on our hoverboards whizzing down the street to my Nobb Hill townhouse.

At home, we settled down into the swiveling leather chairs and I popped the classic movie, *Star Wars*, an example of cultural differences, into our Surround Picture Projector. One click on the module, commanded the lights off; the perfect Friday night treat!

Darth Vader loomed ominously from all corners of the room. We were immersed in the galactic world of adventure.


“Nooooo!” I screeched.

“What?” Natalie questioned.
“No way will this happen! I can’t go to Iraq! Look at this movie, everyone is strange. It’s a scary world! It’s like Iraq. There will be no hoverboards, holographic cell phones, or nano-computers! Girls don’t rank high in their culture, and I don’t want to be invisible! To top it off, my host family lives on a farm. I know this is about learning other cultures, appreciating our differences, and confronting our prejudices, but I am not sure I’m ready for that.”

Despite my attempts to forget about Iraq over the next few weeks, reality took over. A commitment is something you cannot break. People were counting on me – my parents, my teachers, my Spaces exchange student, even my country. All who participate learn to become future leaders, tolerant and wise. Tomorrow was departure day and there were still millions of things to do. Sleep would not come easily tonight.

It was one of those wonderful California days when the fog had burned off the bay, and you could see for miles. The sky was a brilliant cerulean, with wisps of white cotton candy stretching across the horizon. Soaking in one last look, I sighed and snapped the shutters closed. It would be a long time before I would see such a morning again. The familiar warmth and security of my room comforted me and leaving it was more than a bit scary. Would I fit in? Would my host family like me? What would my life be like? When I picked up my bag to go, I spotted the almost forgotten pendant. I picked it up, slipped it over my

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“We will arrive in Baghdad shortly. Please prepare for landing.”

I sighed, closed my lap tray and straightened my seat. Images of my parents waving good-bye to me permeated my brain. Their love and encouragement embraced me across the miles, giving me the courage I needed to start my adventure. I suddenly felt a surge of excitement. The idea of learning new things became appealing. Perhaps I would gain insight and understanding necessary to help me be an ambassador of peace to the world.

As I darted off the plane into the airport, my body jerked to a stop, my eyes blinking at the garish bright lights. The scene was something unimaginable. There were people everywhere, bustling to and fro speaking in an unfamiliar language, that oddly enough I seemed to understand. Women were wearing scarves about their faces revealing only their exotic eyes. No one looked sympathetic or supportive of a lonely, frightened red-headed teenager who was far from home.

I moved through the throng of people, trying to “look normal”, when a hand gripped my shoulder turning me slowly. A tall man with a welcoming smile faced me.

“Hello Katie.” said the stranger.

“How did you know my name?”
“Because you look like my daughter, Zenon.”

How strange, I thought. Apparently this stranger was my host dad: “What do you mean I look like your daughter?” He handed me a small hand mirror. My image made me scream. What had happened to my red hair and blue eyes? Who was this person with brown hair and brown eyes? Thinking back, I remembered my history teacher saying my pendant would help me “fit in”. Now I understood.

Months later, sitting outside in a small dusty courtyard next to the hut that was now my home, I mused over my new life as I shelled peas for dinner. The relentless sun beat down viciously on my face since there were few trees to shade me from the intense desert sun. But, gratitude warmed me as I reflected on the kindness of my new family. Even though the Spaces Pendant enabled me to understand the language, my host family continued to teach me Arabic. Looking like a “local” and understanding the language, helped me truly experience the culture. However, the luxuries I had taken for granted at home, I now missed. In addition, I missed the freedom of being able to go into the city. The nearest town was a mile away. Calling home occasionally was reassuring and kept me in touch with my “old world”.

One night my host dad walked into my room, his face full of sympathy.

“Katie,” he said, “There is something I need to tell you. Our country is at war. The government has cut off all communications with the rest of the world and the United States is considered a hostile country because of their position on our political and religious beliefs.”

Gasping with terror, I grabbed my Access cell and punched the speed dial for my parents. No service. My host dad looked at me kindly.

“I am sorry. The restrictions include cell service.”

I was crestfallen and whimpered softly. My host father put his arm around me hugging me closely, reminding me of my own father.

“I will keep you safe,” he promised.

Out of my own misery came a small voice. “Does this mean that you cannot talk to Zenon either?”

“Yes,” he said sadly.

I began to have nightmares about whistling bombs. My host mother often came into my room at night to comfort me. Many times, I found my host father sleeping against the threshold of my door, protecting me from the evil outside. My host family was like my real family—we laughed, cried, and worried. We wanted the best for each other, no matter what our cultural differences might be.
It was a scary time and we wondered if we would live through this crisis. Eventually the conflict diminished, we all survived, and it was time to go home. My “new” mother and father hugged me tightly before I boarded the plane. My last impression of them was one of sadness and love. I remembered a similar time months ago when my natural parents watched me board the plane. I waved, knowing that I would never forget them and all they had taught me.

Back at school, I stood before my classmates, chronicling my adventure. Everyone stared at me, a redheaded freckled face teenager returning from another world. I tried to help others understand what I had learned. Perhaps they were taken aback by my bravery and staunch values, or my close call with death. Regardless, I found my classmates listening to me. “This experience teaches all of us about our world,” I earnestly spoke. “People are people, no matter where you are. Perhaps it is not cultural heritage that is important but courage, convictions, and respect. It is the appreciation of these differences that will allow us to shape the world and our future.”
2007
Middle Division
Champions
Middle Division International Champions

Skittles for Calisto
1st Place

Miracle Wang
Coach: Kris Bauer
Hamilton Middle School
Topic: Cultural Prejudice
Wisconsin

Back to the Old Dayes
2nd Place

Terchan Newman
Coach: Naomi Brantley
M.L. King Middle School
Topic: Caring for Our Elders
Texas

With Skin as White as Snow
3rd Place

Emma E. Watson
Coach: Rebecca Montgomery
Horizon Middle School
Topic: Cultural Prejudice
Washington

Virtually True
4th Place

Scott Coyte
Coach: Allison-Jane Hayes
St. Peters College
Topic: Entertainment
Australia

Wrong for a Right
5th Place

Ryan A. Zahalka
Coach: Becky Haun
Suncrest Middle School
Topic: Protection of National Treasures
West Virginia
Earth humans are dumber than space rocks. Earth humans are short, with piggy little eyes, stupid clothes and they listen to horrible music. You may ask; why am I different from them? Well, because I’m a Martian. No, I am not an alien. I’m a human... a real human. The humans that never left that ugly blob they have the audacity to call The Blue Planet, are so yesterday. Me? I’m an all-Martian girl. I’m a human of today.

Here’s the deal. In 2031 a colony of two hundred people was established on Mars; Colony Olympus. My mother, Marusu Sasaki, was the very first baby ever born on Mars. In the eyes of the Earthlings, she was nothing short of a goddess. A couple of decades later, she married my dad and had me, Calisto Sasaki. My parents nicknamed me Cali when I was little, but no one who wanted their skull to stay intact ever called me that in public.

Anyway, I grew up on Mars, where there is a reasonable amount of gravity, instead of bowling-ball weight, where you wear an oxygen tank and a space helmet whenever you go outside, where it’s nice and cool instead of boiling hot, where you work as a team and stay in a dark, tight space instead of the dizzying openness of Earth’s atmosphere. I didn’t think it would be so bad when my mom decided we should launch on the four year journey to the Blue Planet, but now (two months after the landing), I’d give anything to be back on Mars.

I remember my first day on Earth. I’d gotten out of the ship and immediately collapsed from the huge amount of gravity on my weak limbs. The sun was blinding and it was really weird to breath outside of sealed doors. The moment I got to Earth, I hated it. But, I’d only seen the beginning. When I first came to school, everybody avoided me and looked at me strangely.

Then, they started to make fun of me. They made fun of my pale skin, my height, my huge eyes, the way I dressed, the way I talked and the braces on my legs that I needed to support me in the insane amount of gravity. This, I thought, was absolutely ridiculous. They were telling me I looked weird. I don’t think so! I mean, what kind of geek wants to dress like an idiot, have mud-colored skin and listen to music that sounds like the screeching breaks of a jet-mobile? I didn’t. And I told them so. It’s a good thing I’m tough, because I had to stand a lot of bullying. Some of them I could scare off by telling them I’d spit toxic acid, and others I crushed with my verbal combat skills.
Then, I met her. She was the quiet girl without a name, who sat in the back of class with her nose in a book, pausing every now and then to hitch up her zoom-view glasses. Earth kids came in many different forms of loser. She was just another one of them. I first talked to her at lunchtime in the cafeteria. My mom always packed me my own lunch because even if I tried, I couldn’t choke down some of the awful stuff they call food on Earth. And I always sat alone, at the end of a deserted table in the corner. I’d just opened my lunch box when the girl came waltzing over and set down her tray of ‘food’.

“Uh... what makes you think this is okay?” I said as the weirdo hitched up her glasses. She didn’t answer and that made me angry, “Dork-face,” I snapped, “This is my table. Buzz off.”

As if she hadn’t heard me, the girl held out her hand, grinning like an idiot, “I’m Anita.”

I slapped her hand away, “Go away,” I said through gritted teeth, “Or I’ll melt you with my death ray.”

The girl didn’t seem to buy it, but she picked up her tray and left. But, she was back the next day, “Hi.” She said, smiling her annoying smile and sitting down.

“Evaporate.” I hissed.

“Listen,” Anita pulled a book out, her tiny eyes sparkling behind her glasses, “Can I ask you something.”

“No.”

Undaunted, she began flipping, excitedly through the pages of her book, which was titled Colony Olympus.

Then, to my horror, she began pelting me with stupid questions. “Is it true, the journey back from Mars takes four years? Is really that dark and cold? Are they seriously going to build a space elevator to Colony Olympus? How do the nano-computers work? Have you ever-”

“Whoa,” I held up my hand, “Stop right there, shorty.”

But she didn’t, “You’re so tall because there’s so little gravity, right?” She said, her eyes twinkling, “Wow. I wish I was tall!”

I stared at her, like she was an alien. No one I’d met so far had been curious or envious of my being a Martian human, “What is wrong with you?” I said.

She wasn’t listening, “Then, you know how to use the nano-computers?”

“Um... yeah.”
“Oh, boy, oh, boy, oh, boy!” She bounced up and down in her seat, “This is so awesome!”

“Oh... right.” I said.

“Oh, it must have been so cool to live on Mars!” She stared at me in amazement, but not like I was a freak. She looked at me like I was some kind of hero, “Tell me everything about it!”

And the next thing I knew, I’d started spilling my life story. Why, I wasn’t sure. But, it felt wonderful to talk freely about life on the Red Planet. Anita hung on every word, like it was a lifeline.

Every day after that, Anita sat with me, and every day I told her about Mars and Colony Olympus. I hadn’t had friends since I’d left Mars. But, I became friends with Anita, which was weird. Of course, everything about Anita was weird, but she could make me laugh. That seemed to be one thing that all humans, Martian or Earthling, had in common; they loved to laugh.

Soon, people began to treat me more like one of the crowd and I found myself asking Anita questions about Earth. I realized that I sort of liked the screeching breaks music that they played on their Nano-pods. And I even liked their food... especially candy. Candy was sweet.

I found out the day Anita bought me Skittles from the cart.

“You’ve got to be kidding.” I said picking one of the small candies and examining it. The tiny tablet felt hard enough to break my teeth, “You eat these?”

Anita smiled. I’d come to like the way these people smiled. It went well with their small eyes, “Try it. They’re good.”

They were good; like raspberries we had from the growing chamber on Mars, only much sweeter. And they didn’t even break my teeth.

A few weeks later, I realized that I could go outside comfortably without sunglasses. Shortly after that, they took the braces off my legs. I could walk and run and jump now as normally as any Earth human. I even beat Anita in a race.

“You know,” she said as we caught our breath at the finish line, “It’s Friday. You should come to my house for a sleepover tonight, Calisto. Lilly’s going to be there too. It’ll be fun.”

That night, Anita and I were sitting on the roof of her house, looking at the stars. Lilly had gone in because she was too cold, but Earth was never cold enough for me.

“Someday,” Anita said, touching the switch on the side of her glasses, so they zoomed in on some of the stars, “I’m going to Colony Olympus. In thirty years, who knows? The space elevator might be in motion.”
“Mars is great,” I sighed, “But, now that I’m here, I wouldn’t waste another four years of my life going back.” I lay back on the roof, so that the heavens opened above me. The vast sea twinkling stars reminded me of Anita’s eyes the first time they’d lit up.

There was a moment of silence. Then, I dug into my pocket and pulled out a crumpled package of Skittles, “I almost forgot,” I opened the bag and held it out to Anita, “I got these for you.”

“You... got something for me?” She turned, the stars reflected in her glasses. Reaching in, she picked out a cherry flavored Skittle and held it up to the sky so that it was surrounded by a universe of stars, “I always liked the red ones best.”

“They’re pretty good.” I said, reaching into the bag, “But, you know,” I pulled out a blue-raspberry Skittle and held it up next to hers, “The blue ones aren’t so bad either.”
As Earl sat in his Lazy-Boy recliner listening to the golden oldies on his radio, he thought of his family that he had left behind. He cringed, for his flashback was most unkind. In the home of Christy, his great-granddaughter, things had not worked out for him. He had complained about the tasteless food she prepared on her sterile Cook Master 3000, about her husband’s super project-a-screen television, about her daughter’s holo-babies which cried all night more loudly than any real baby ever could, and about her son’s roof-rocking Super Jam-a-lator Music Ball. It had been too much noise, too much movement, too much, too much of everything twenty-four hours a day seven days a week.

“Turn that crap off, Andy!” he had yelled. “You’ll go deaf listening to that junk!”

Sometimes Earl had wondered if the boy had already lost his sense of hearing because he never responded to anything his great-great-grandfather said to him.

Oh, he had thought his life was so miserable. He had wanted to leave, but the Seniordences that had been built for elderly citizens during the last fifty years were so high-tech, so perfectly prepared to care for their every physical need, so coldly impersonal. Android robots picked them up if they fell, medicated them when they were ill, bathed them, and combed their hair; they even brushed their teeth, trimmed the hair from their ears, and clipped their toenails. The elderly unable to care for themselves and who had no family members were sent to one of the Seniordences whether they wanted to go or not. Only those with family willing to take them in and provide total care were allowed a choice in the matter.

Earl had family willing to take him in. Christy. She loved him; he adored her. They just didn’t seem to live in the same world. Earl had wanted to go back to the world he knew; his great-granddaughter, had reluctantly let him go.

Earl looked around the room, his place in time. The familiar pictures and fixtures brought him no comfort now. “Be careful what you wish for, boy; you just might get it,” he murmured, recalling the long-ago words his own grandfather used to say to him. “Oh, Pops, I should have listened,” he sighed and closed his tired eyes.

There in his memory lingered Christy, like a ray of golden sunlight. “Oh, dear girl,” he addressed the glowing image, “what an old fool I was!”

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“He’s so unhappy here,” Christy said to her husband Larry one Saturday morning while surfing the Universalnet on her touchfree PC Pod. “He really wants to leave, but none of the Seniordences please him. What are we to do, Larry?”

“There is that Old Dayes space community near Mars that I told you about last month. Remember?”

“I remember, but you said we would not be allowed to visit him.”

“No, we would not be allowed to visit. According to their ad, visits from family tend to upset their clients. Tell you what, why not talk it over with Papa Earl? Let him decide, Chris.”

“I’m afraid he’ll decide to go.”

“He has that right, honey.”

Her husband was right, of course. Although he shared her firm belief that families should stay together regardless of the sacrifices involved, he knew that at this point it was not their decision to make. The thought that her wanting to keep Papa Earl with them might be a selfish violation of the older man’s rights saddened her deeply. “He needs us,” she said, biting her bottom lip in a futile attempt to control its uncontrollable trembling.

“Talk it over with him, honey.” Larry leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “You know I’m with you all the way.” At dinner that night, Earl complained about the high-tech house, the holograms, talking walls, cleaning robots, and magic doors without knobs. “Now when I was a boy on the farm,” he launched into one of his back-in-the-day reminisces, “a man opened the door for a lady, and walls did not talk! Why, if I ran into a wall, my head swelled like Elmer Fudd’s.” As a memory of Elmer chasing Bugs Bunny crossed his mind, a soft smile crossed his face.

“Who’s Elmer Fudd?” Christy laughed, seeing the old man’s smile.

“Oh, just a cartoon character from way back before your time,” he chuckled. “That was back when cartoons made us laugh.” So much had changed. Too much. With that thought his smile faded. “When can we leave for the Old Dayes?”

Christy was stunned. “You said you would think about it, Papa Earl”

“I’m done thinking.”

There was nothing more Christy could say.

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As Earl, Christy, and Larry toured the Old Dayes community, Earl pointed excitedly to a man dialing a telephone and exclaimed, “Look at that!” He was overjoyed to learn that each residential community in the Neighborhoods of the Decades was built to reflect a specific decade. Sections 1950 and 1960 had a collection of Elvis Presley’s music. They even had farms! Earl’s grin stretched from ear to ear, and his face shone like a full moon. “When can I move in?” he eagerly asked Ms. Nancy Anderson, their guide.

Ms. Anderson laughed, “Not so fast. We do have a week-long orientation for you and your family. If you decide to stay with us, we have a six month trial period.”

When they made it to the Victorian-styled front office, Christy stared at the door-knob, a peculiar look on her face. “Must all the doors be opened manually?”

“You bet!” said Earl. “That’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

“No, it isn’t!” Christy disagreed. “Larry and I have never touched a door in our entire lives! Why, it’s...it’s inconvenient, to say the least, and... and unsanitary!”

Earl looked around. “Here they have created a world like the one I knew; here is where I want to spend my remaining years.”

At the end of the week of orientation, Earl said his good-byes to Larry and Christy. He had found the life he wanted among other seniors like him who wanted to return to a simpler place in time. He refused to allow Christy’s final argument to dampen his joy.

“Papa Earl,” she had said, “it’s a make-believe world, a long way from your real home with us. We must keep moving forward, Papa Earl. That’s the way life is. We can’t go back to the old days no matter how badly we want to or how hard we try. They are selling you a dream.” As Larry had led her away, she had turned to Ms Anderson and choked out, “Remember our agreement.”

Earl had looked one last time into Christy’s tear-filled eyes, those bright, honest eyes so much like those of his beloved late wife Elizabeth.

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Now Earl sat in his lonely Lazy-Boy recliner listening to his lonely golden oldies on his lonely radio. Modern science had extended the life span of so many elderly ones, and modern inventions had created well-equipped homes for them. Although he had good neighbors, they could not take the place of the family he had rejected, the family that had so lovingly taken him into their hearts and their home. His initial joy of being in the Old Dayes had evaporated months ago as he gradually came to realize that the entire setup was nothing more than a fancy Seniordence designed especially for fools like him who thought they could live in the past. It was an antique’s warehouse for antiques like him, he thought sadly. “I’m stuck,” he said aloud, well aware that the six-month trial period had passed months ago, making him a permanent resident.
A soft knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. He rose slowly from his chair, and shuffled across the room to open the door. He stared into those eyes he had thought never to see again. “Christy!” he choked out and gripped the doorknob to steady himself.

Christy looked into her great-grandfather’s moist eyes. “Well, we were in the neighborhood.”

Earl looked behind Christy where Larry stood with their two smiling children. His family.

“We thought you might need a ride home, Papa Earl,” Andy said, and they all laughed. They laughed later as they waved farewell to a smiling Ms. Anderson who had honored her agreement with Christy to double the six-month trial period; they laughed as they left the Old Dayes behind them to board their earth-bound flight; and they howled with delight when Papa Earl fed a crying holobaby, tapped his foot to the beat of Andy’s roof-rocking music and asked, “Who needs a doorknob?”
With Skin as White as Snow

3rd Place

By: Emma E. Watson

Topic - Cultural Prejudice

When the Solution reached the White House on January the 14th of 2074, it was quite by mistake. Congressman Daniel Wyatt had simply swept the manila envelope into a teetering stack of documents to be sent up to the secretary, and though he did not know it yet, the end of humanity as the world knew it was now folded carefully away in the hands of the government.

*****

Jerome brought his quivering hands closer to the fire. Despite the flames, the heat and light did little to penetrate the thick veil of darkness that had settled in the building. He glanced around him at the others, the ones who, like him, had been forced from their homes into hiding. A little Latina girl with a drawn face and glittering brown eyes huddled in the familiar crook of her mother’s arm. An Indian family whispered prayers and words of comfort to one another in their intricate tongue. A young African-American couple held each others hands, their cheeks damp with tears of grief and fear. The words of a leering masked white man echoed in Jerome’s ears; eliminate your culture or eliminate yourself. In the closed minds of those with power, the “educated” leaders of the country had found the Solution to cultural prejudice.

In 2073, a serum had been invented by a man of anonymity, intended to bleach the skin cells an unnatural white. A mere seven months prior to the development of the serum, a machine was created by Inventions for a New Millennium (INM). It was designed to wipe cultural, religious, or in any way un-conforming principles from the minds of those of different nationalities. Combined with the serum, it would supposedly “leave no physical or intellectual precincts between the unity of all human beings.” Those who did not conform were eliminated, slight flaws in the plan that were removed by the practiced hand of the FBI. Many had refused to let their culture slip away, but few had made it to hiding. Scattered across town in abandoned storage units and buildings, they remained unknown to the government, only leaving the safety of their hideouts to gather food in the dead of night.

Jerome absently rubbed the stubble on his chin, deep in thought. Only when he felt the slight tug on his sleeve did he look down. The little girl with the bright eyes stood beside him, gazing up at him with a toothy grin that was precious to behold. In her hand she held a tattered storybook, Snow White; her favorite. Holding it out to her friend, she asked Jerome to read from it. The mother sat in the corner, and smiled at him as he swept the little girl into his lap. Finally letting her weary eyes rest, the exhausted parent whispered an inaudible “thank you” as sleep finally overcame her. Smiling down at the child, Jerome opened the book.
“Once upon a time,” he began in the soft, cozy voice he saved just for his favorite girl, “in a manor far beyond the village, there lived a fair young maiden, whose skin was white as snow, and whose lips were red as—” The little hand on his cheek stopped him from continuing with the story. The child was looking up at him, studying his eyes intently. Finally, she asked him in a low voice,

“Is that what we’re supposed to look like, J’rome?” Reaching out and stroking her drawn cheek with the back of his hand, he stooped his head so that he was gazing directly into her face.

“No, Ana. Color is just color, no matter what anyone might tell you. The only thing that matters is what’s in here,” he said, taking her hand and touching it to her heart. Suddenly she smiled again, and snuggled against his chest, tapping the page where he had left off with gleeful expectance.

Night had finally fallen; adults began readying themselves to go out and salvage food for their families. Children were dozing in the arms of their older siblings, or else in the warm cocoons of blankets in corners near the fire. Tonight it was Jerome’s turn to search for food with the others, having stayed with the children the night before. He slipped a small TASER gun in his belt, grimacing as he latched the delicate clip onto the thick vinyl strip around his slender waist. He hated having to arm himself, even with the simplest of weapons. Others around him were doing the same, even Ana’s mother, who was loading small silver pellets into a lethal-looking weapon that clipped onto the palm of her hand.

When Jerome slid the door of the unit quietly open, the night breeze played across his face, quenching his thirst for fresh air. They made their way through the maze of dead ends and alleyways in record time, appreciating more than ever the elusive location. It was almost completely undetectable. The ten men and women split up in different directions, moving with fearful stealth through the streets. Buildings rose like mountains on either side of them, paneled in impenetrable titanium. The group came to a circular structure; shelves of supplies and canned foods were visible through the glass. Jerome expertly slid a thin metal wire underneath the key pad, and when he heard the soft, almost inaudible beep, he touched three numbers on the door’s password protected security system. After waiting four seconds, he pressed the enter button and leaned down hard on the handle. The door swung open soundlessly and he stepped inside the building, motioning for two men to follow.

That’s when it happened. An alarm began sounding, echoing through the streets on speakers mounted high on each building; A new installment, no doubt, since the last break in. This had happened before; no problem. It usually took security an average six minutes to arrive on the scene, and they would be back in the storage unit long before then.
Pivoting silently, the three men made their way to the end of the street, where they usually met up with the other group. But something was wrong; the other group was not there. This had not happened before. And then the reason became clear, for out in the middle of the street, four heavily armed white men dressed in black uniforms were stepping over the limp bodies of three people. Jerome and the three men with him slid behind the edge of a building, hidden in the shadows. Suddenly a small voice called out from the opposite end of the street.

“Mama?” Ana stood in a smudged night gown, the storybook in her hand, her feet bare. And Jerome realized with horror who had been shot by the guards. “Mama?” Ana’s voice was becoming shriller, and the heads of the guards turned toward the sound of her cries. One of them began to draw his tazer as Ana ran toward her mother’s limp form. Jerome knew what he had to do before the man had completely pulled the weapon from its sheath. Leaping from behind the edge of the building, he sprinted toward the child. Grabbing her frail form, he covered her small body with his as the blue light shot from the gun in the guard’s hand. It hit Jerome in the back, staining his white shirt with blood. Stunned by surprise, the guard who had fired stared dumbfounded at the man who had came from nowhere. Seizing the opportunity, the other men from the group ran from their hiding places and grabbed the child from under Jerome’s lifeless form, racing toward the maze of allies. Once there, they could easily lose the men in the twists and turns through which only those who lived within them knew their way. The guards left the body of the black man who had given his life for the little girl, and as the wind picked up, it turned the pages of the storybook that the child had dropped. “There once lived a fair maiden, with skin as white as snow.”
The green light above the Reamplace Temoprtor began to flash. A whining hum sounded from within the cylindrical building.

Inside, Marilino’s body slowly materialised. A pale-blue light illuminated the chamber. A synthetic voice enunciated happily, “Reamplace Aperture. Take off your suit. Have a nice day.”

A small circular portal in the metal wall split vertically, through which a metallic robotic arm extended. Marilino handed his electromagnetic suit to the arm, which promptly retracted back through the portal. The door panel split open in front of him, revealing the noisy Reamplace food-market. Stepping out, he glanced about, licking his lips.

* * *

Marilino’s stomach rumbled slightly. He had just downed a reasonable meal and yet he was still hungry. Standing up, he walked down to a nearby park, and started off down a grassy riverside path.

A blade of grass caught his attention. He bent down for a closer look. It appeared to be flashing blue and red every few seconds. Frowning, he tried to pick it from the ground, but it refused to pull out. Shrugging, Marilino stood up and continued.

“Oi Marilino! How y’ doing?” called his best friend, walking up to him.

“Not bad, Jackeleg. What’cha doing?” asked Marilino.

“Going down to the Reamplace,” replied Jackeleg.

“Yeah. Hey, I’m going down to the Daitern. Wanna come?”

“All right.”

They set off together. Not being particularly fit, the undulating path soon had them puffing. Sitting down at a bench, Marilino gazed lazily at the ground.

A blade of grass flashed blue. Marilino blinked.

“Look Jackeleg! That blade of grass is flashing. Weird, eh? Wonder why.”


“Yeah...what?! Oh yeah! No wonder I’m hungry. Better get going. See ya!”
Marilino jumped up, and slapped the underside of his shoe, ignoring his friend’s protests. His menu faded in, occupying the bottom half of his vision. Ignoring the MenuMap, the Inventory, and his friend’s surprised face, he jabbed with his arm at the ‘Quit’ button. The ‘Are you sure?’ dialog box popped up. He punched ‘Yes’. His vision went black as a synthetic female voice piped up. “It is now safe to turn off your VR Suite. Please remove your headset.”

He ripped off his silver helmet. He was back to reality.

Marilino had only purchased this Virtual Reality Suite a month ago. “A whole lot of useless wires and mess,” his grandfather called it, but hey! It was definitely more interesting than working in the local Data Archive Museum (DAM), cleaning obsolete CDs. Much more interesting.

Anyway, he couldn’t see why he shouldn’t have a bit of fun for once. He could never forget the night when an armed police officer had appeared on the doorstep of their rented house. Lugubriously, he had informed Marilino that his parents (both physicists) had been tragically killed in a plasma explosion while working on a new type of nano-porter. Next day, a despondent Marilino was moving his few belongings to his grandfather’s house.

When Marilino had told his grandfather of his plan to buy the latest VR Suite, Pop had been horrified. “When I was your age, we only had lumpy PCs to work with. Sure there were computer games. Many. Played ‘em myself. Oh, yes I did. And sure, I liked them. Loved them! Played them all the time, hours on end. I couldn’t get away from them. ‘Course, there were warnings. Once heard o’ someone who had killed his best friend, ‘cause he’d stolen his sword in a game. But you know what? I ignored all them warnings. Failed high school, I did. Had to work in an office building, cleaning ceilings. Don’t look at me like that. I woke up. I worked hard. Started a security business. Successful, I was. Look at you! Unprepared for the real world! I don’t want you falling into the same trap as me!”

But as most young men would, Marilino ignored the advice. Nothing his grandfather did or said seemed able to lure Marilino away from his virtual world. Often he would completely forget about reality; he would become utterly immersed in living the game. He didn’t eat. He didn’t drink. He didn’t sleep. For Marilino, the virtual world was becoming the real world.

* * *

The armpurrchair squeaked slightly as it adjusted to Marilino’s personal body shape. After a tiring day at DAM, he felt as if he deserved some relaxation. From his pocket, he withdrew his personal VR identification strip, and reached down towards his shining VR Suite, placed conveniently beside his armpurrchair. Inserting the strip into a vertical slot on top of the console, he placed this wireless VR Helmet carefully on his head as the machine beeped. His vision went blank as he pulled down his visor.

After a few seconds, a dialog box appeared in the centre of his vision. “Start Game?” He reached out and prodded the ‘Yes’ button. Immediately, he was standing on a path amongst some large oak trees.
A bird flew past as Marilino walked down towards the Reamplace. Part way, he rested on a park bench next to a slumped, ill-looking young man. Through the corner of his eye, Marilino saw the man’s arm flicker.

He turned sharply for a better look. The man’s head was resting on his right shoulder. He looked as if he was in a deep sleep. But Marilino couldn’t see him breathing.

He was about to ask “Are you all right?” when the man’s whole body began to flicker. His figure started to fade away, quivering uncontrollably. Marilino leapt from the bench and backed away, aghast. Onlookers gasped in horror as the disturbing figure unfocused rapidly, fading from sight. All that was left was an unoccupied bench.

That night, watching the World-Wid-Bulletin with his grandfather, Marilino watched in horror the story of the young man who had died whilst gaming in the Virtual World.

“Mr. Jonhal, a twenty-four year old network-gaming addict, apparently stayed in a Virtual Reality game for over three weeks without exiting to eat or drink. His body died from malnutrition while he was still playing the game.”

The reporter continued. “This has landed Crackix, the developers of the game and prominent entertainment production company, in the midst of a real controversy. “CRACKIX feels sympathetic for Mr Jonhal’s family, but we cannot be held responsible,” said a spokesperson.

For the first time, Marilino actually realised the dangers of virtual reality. No-one was safe. The same thing could happen to his best friend…or perhaps even himself! Perhaps Pop had been right all along.

“How many times have I warned you, Marilino?” he said reproachfully. “Lucky you weren’t the victim. I tell you, the idea of network games for entertainment isn’t new. Fifty years ago, people were spending hours in front of computer monitors playing network games. Sure, many people thought it pointless and unsafe. Bud did anyone protest strongly? Nope. Now, technology’s advanced so far that the virtual world isn’t on a computer screen; it’s all around you. You’ve been living something that isn’t real, Marilino. And Crackix has sure took advantage of all you gamers. Money, money, money. Probably gave them exponentially increasing profits! But I tell you, Marilino, Crackix doesn’t give a damn about their customers!

“But they worry if they lose customers, don’t they?” commented Marilino.

“Course. It’s all they do worry about, ’cause it’s losing profit.”

“Do you reckon they know how dangerous virtual reality is?”

“Probably. But they’re not going to warn anyone.”

“And there’s no law to protect the users, is there Pop?”

“None at all.”
For several days, Marilino couldn’t stop ruminating not just about how dangerous the game was, but how diverting and enjoyable it was. Something had to be done, he decided. He discussed the issue at virtual community-conferences. He told his story on famous current affairs programs. He talked with politicians. He argued with Crackix spokespersons. He even managed to convince gamers in the Virtual World that virtual reality was dangerous without suitable restrictions. The movement steadily gained momentum.

Many thought he was crazy. Some thought he was fighting a losing battle. But perseverance brings success. With the help of some supporting government ministers, Marilino finally managed to force an agreement on Crackix.

* * *

Marilino chuckled to himself, strolling along the virtual riverbank. He was watching a gamer who seemed to be rather troubled. Frowning intensely, the man was staring pointedly at something in front of him and waving his arms about. Then abruptly, he disappeared.

But Marilino wasn’t worried. He was reassured.

After three hours, a red message appeared at the bottom of his vision. I read ‘You have been playing for three hours.’ Marilino ignored it.

In two minutes time, the message appeared again, but this time there was an extension ‘Please exit’. Marilino ignored it yet again.

After a minute, a message appeared. ‘Disconnecting in ten seconds. You may not re-connect for two hours.’

Marilino smiled. He had succeeded.
Wrong for a Right

5th Place

By: Ryan A. Zahalka

Topic - Protection of National Treasures

I padded noiselessly through the manicured lawn, melting from patch of darkness to patch of darkness, dodging behind stone benches each time a patrolling guard turned his head my way. Fortunately, my ebony skin and apparel combined with the overcast night to shield me from discovery. As I neared the smooth granite walls of the bank, I came upon the majestic red and gold banners draped at its front.

I recalled the headline spanning the front page of last week's Chinese Socialist: “President Li-Tzu Tang Approves Sale of Last Surviving Brick of the Great Wall of China.” Following it was an article praising President Tang for his economic and diplomatic brilliance in selling it for over six billion dollars, as well as admiring his philanthropy in allotting the proceeds to the construction of a children’s hospital. What B.S.! Every penny of it would be siphoned into Tang’s personal account.

Accompanying the article was a video-photo of Tang shaking hands with some rich Japanese collector. Behind them were these same granite walls, adorned with the red and gold tapestries that dominated my field of vision. The bank would house the brick until its departure, arranged for tomorrow. However, if I succeeded in my nocturnal escapade, daybreak would reveal nothing to be delivered. Coincidently, the International History Preservation Museum in Beijing would have an eerily similar piece of the Great Wall on display.

I proceeded to the nearest tapestry and calibrated my suction meshed gloves and kneepads. Moving slowly so as not to cause giveaway flutters, I climbed the granite behind the banner to a portrait-sized window high above ground level. From my perch, I could see the Yangtze River carelessly winding itself through the countryside, homes huddling close to its fertile banks. It was heartening to think that I was preserving the rich history of all those people and the symbol of their unity. Lazy gluttons like Tang had no right to feed like carrion beasts on the body of their country’s culture and heritage. It was in this same way that Egypt lost its whole Tutankhamen exhibit, Brazil lost Pélé’s jersey, and the way many other countries lost the tokens of their history. I was determined not to let the same fate befall my adopted country.

From the vantage point the hanging offered, I could see the faint red glow of the pressure detectors integrated into the masonry around the five-inch-thick bulletproof glass. With my laser scalpel, I removed a circular segment of the glass, being careful to velcro it to the underside of the hanging. My labor resulted in a hole large enough for me to slip through. As laser grids and motion sensors were outdated, where I stepped was not an immediate problem. What did pose a dilemma was the guard directly below me, his fists clenched tightly around a semi-automatic rifle.
Even though I felt uneasy about harming someone, my current situation didn’t allow for any other course of action. I let myself drop feet first directly onto the guard, knocking him out cold without so much as a cry escaping his lips. As a precaution, I propped the guard against the wall and placed the gun back into his hands, making a fairly convincing image of him reposing against the wall.

Just as planned, I found myself in the security office. In mid-air were the projections of the live feeds from outside the vault housing the Great Wall Brick. I downloaded today’s camera codes onto my watch’s Electromagnetic Camera Override (ECO), and proceeded to ascend into the vent joining the security office to the anteroom of the vault. I crawled army-style through the polished ducts, zapped the cameras with my ECO, and dropped softly to the ground right behind the colossal mercenary guarding the vault. Regrettably, I wasn’t blessed with the option of something as quick or clean as the last encounter. I thrust my taser into his back, instantly knocking him out. With Mr. Sasquatch out of the way, I could finally face the vault.

Its imposing door seemed to glower at me, daring me to challenge its impregnability. And not without reason. This was the crown jewel of all security banks in the East. Five feet of titanium with carbon nanotube exterior plating posed a formidable opponent for any who would attempt to force entry into the depths it protected. Topping it off were extensive biometric scanners set to grant access to only the bank’s treasurer, president, and head security consultant. I stepped into the biometric capsule, where mechanical sensors checked my DNA, retinal composition, finger and toe prints, as well as my dental positioning. A green light flashed on, followed by a smooth female voice. “Julius Aléhandro, head security consultant to Xiao Bank. Access granted.” Being the security consultant of the bank you were robbing was extremely convenient. After exiting the capsule, I watched the vault doors slide silently back, revealing riches rivaling those of King Solomon.

Rows and rows of stainless steel shelves flashed in the bright light, stretching on for at least sixty meters, each row occupied by some or another kind of treasure. Great slabs of coal took up the first few rows. Precious plastic ingots filled most of the vault, and burnished bricks of platinum, silver, and gold occupied the rest of the shelf space. The treasures surrounding me were incredibly tempting. However, if anything other than the Great Wall Brick disappeared, it would portray the robbery as a common theft, devoid of the statement a targeted robbery would send.

The crumbling sandstone block looked very out of place among such splendor, failing to give the correct impression that its worth exceeded the value of all the other hoarded wealth surrounding it. Indeed, the only clue to its value was the plethora of protection surrounding it.

Here was where the traditional laser beam grid came into play. The seemingly random movement of the beams covered an eight-foot radius around the casing of the brick. To sell the system to the Xiao Bank executives, I represented the programming of the beams as being run by a complex algorithm that came up with different beam movements every thirty seconds. In truth, the rays were programmed to go through the movements of my favorite tae-kwon-do kata. I went through the complicated movements, a flurry of kicks, punches, handstands and the like that were synchronized to the beam movements, allowing me to get to the other side without setting anything off.
I tenderly removed the last surviving symbol of Chinese unity and freedom from its pedestal, placing it gingerly into the metal case slung at my back. I repeated the moves of the kata in reverse, resealed the vault, and permanently deleted my name from today’s entry list. I climbed into the vent, this time taking a steadily upward-sloped route, and finally ended up on the flat roof.

I glanced up at the star strewn sky, looking for any signs of my accomplice, Khan Tamunji. His job was to execute my extraction from the roof, flying in on my custom-made jet bike. I looked down at my watch; Khan was five minutes late, very uncharacteristic of his Mongolian punctuality. At last I spotted a blackness darker than night approaching me at breakneck speed. Five yards away it came to a shuddering halt, its engine humming as it hovered. The large, unmistakable bulk of Khan limped from the bike. In the faint light cast by the newly uncovered stars, I could see he was grievously hurt. Before I could comment, he painfully gasped, “…Ran into Skypatrol...got shot…”

I lost no time in heaving him onto the back seat of the bike. I mounted it myself and revved the engine, shattering the silence. Immediately the cough of machine gun fire ensued from below.

The burst of bullets made me swerve violently, throwing Khan off. He caught hold of the brick’s satchel that was still clenched in my hands. The sudden jerk caused its nylon strap to partially rip, leaving the rest of the band fraying rapidly under Khan’s weight. In seconds, it would give out, sending Khan and the brick to their deaths.

In front of me was an exceptionally difficult choice that would have to be decided within a matter a seconds. Lift Khan back onto the jet bike and we would both be riddled with bullets. Relinquish Khan and I would preserve the brick and our mission, though condemn a father, husband and friend to sure death. The sound of guards rushing to the roof only hastened my decision.

In one fluid motion, I dislodged Khan, sending him toppling down six stories. His face froze in such a haunting visage of shock and surprise at my betrayal that it would never leave me as long as I lived.

Just as the guards rushed onto the rooftop, I fled into the night towards the safe haven of the International Historic Preservation Museum compound.
2007
Senior Division Champions
Senior Division International Champions

Different
1st Place

Paul Nelson
Homeschooled
Iowa
Coach: Paula Lawson-Moore
Topic: Cultural Prejudice

A Private Affair
2nd Place

Reuben Henriquez
West High School
Wisconsin
Coach: Lynn Buckmaster
Topic: Privacy

Trascending Light
3rd Place

Taffeta O’Neal
Greenbrier High
Tennessee
Coach: Sandi Swink
Topic: Cultural Prejudice

Under a Concrete Sky
4th Place

David Middlemiss
KeriKeri High School
Australia
Coach: Joan Middlemiss
Topic: Nutrition

The Cicada’s Flight
5th Place

Hillary Travis
Powhatan High
Virginia
Coach: Conway Blankenship
Topic: Privacy
“Heads up, scrub!”

Nate looked just in time to see the yellow glideball smash into his face. He fell to the ground, followed by his pile of holobooks. His thick black glasses tumbled across the floor.

Howls of laughter echoed through the glassy corridors of Neo-New York High School. Nate’s face flushed with shame as he faltered after his glasses. His myopic eyes struggled to focus on the hazy world around him.

“Never mind a glideball... with those things on his face, he should be seeing Lunar City!” taunted an obnoxious voice. Nate froze. Nearsighted or not, he recognized the husky silhouette standing over him: the school jock, Trevor.

“Hey Nate! You ready to get those eyes replaced and join the rest of us in the twenty-first century?”

Nate stood up, shakily. “Can I have my glasses back, Trevor?”

The blurry, muscular blob snorted. “Whatever, scrub.”

Nate felt his glasses being roughly shoved back onto his face. He straightened the bulky plastic frames, relaxing slightly as the world came back into focus. Trevor gave Nate another scornful laugh and walked away.

Trevor’s nickname of “The Cyborg” was well-earned. Bioplasm implants of all sorts covered the boy’s body. From the bulging biceps underneath his shirt to the neural uplink im-bedded in his skull, the blue glow of artificiality emanated from every anatomical region.

Nate remembered the day bioplasm had arrived. His first-grade teacher had squirted a blob of the blue gel into each student’s hand, exuberantly explaining the wonder of it all: how the byproducts of genetically-modified algae could, with the application of highly sophisticated treatments, be transformed into synthetic analogues of biological tissue. Bioplasm could create muscles that were more dense, brains that were more compact, and bones that were far stronger than their human parallels.
As Nate gathered his books ashamedly, he looked around at his fellow students. Nearly all of them had replaced body parts with bioplasm “augments,” as the kids had termed the devices. The school population reflected perfectly a culture consumed with gaining and keeping every edge. But Nate Weirz, his parents, and six hundred thousand other citizens of the world were exceptions to this overarching trend. They formed a unique fragment of modern society, a subculture that kept their bodies unaltered. And as he picked his last book off the floor, Nate had no idea why.

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Nate took a cautious step off the school’s hovertram, nervously looking down the street towards Trevor’s house. Seeing no one, Nate plodded towards his own residence. He opened the door and was greeted by the affectionate buzz of the household computer system.

“Welcome home, son!” Doctor Weirz stepped out of his study, smiling warmly. Nate gave a desultory “Hi,” threw himself down on the couch and flipped on the telepanel. His father, a grey-haired, studious man in his mid-forties, raised an eyebrow. “Trouble in school again?”

Nate remembered that very little escaped the eyes of his physician parent. “Yeah.”

His father grunted, staring at the screen with his son. “You feel like talking about it?”

Nate shut off the panel and shrugged. “Not really.”

A pause. “Your mother’s not back from Cerberus yet; she said she’ll be a few more days.”

More silence. “I hear there’s a refill tanker docking tonight; you wanna see it?”

The bioplasm in human augments needed to be replaced every six weeks. Huge Leviathan-class supertankers shipped the product from offshore farms to major population areas on a regular basis. The gigantic ocean-going vessels were always a sight to see. Normally, Nate would have jumped at the chance to glimpse another of the engineering marvels.

“But really,” he repeated. “I’ve got a ton of homework.”

His father looked surprised, but nodded. “Good boy. I have a holo-conference in an hour; I’ll try to have dinner ready after that. See you then.” He started walking back towards his office.

“Dad?”

The doctor turned around. “Yes, son?”

Nate took a deep breath. “Why do we choose to be different?”
His father let the office door slide shut. He walked over to the sofa and sat down next to his son. He was silent for a moment, considering each thought with care.

“Is this about what’s been happening in school?” he asked finally. Nate nodded.

His father smiled. “Does it bother you that we’re different?”

Nate knit his brows. “Yeah, Dad, it does. Why do we want to stand out from everyone else?”

His father stood up and walked to the window. “Look out there, son. What do you see?”

The lights from the distant metropolis glimmered on the horizon. “I see the city,” said Nate.

“No,” his father said, staring off into the distance. “You see the Earth. You see temperate grasslands, scorching deserts, frozen wastelands, and dripping rainforests. You see a variety of habitats unlike any other world this galaxy has shown us. And yet human beings manage to in-habit each and every corner of this globe. How?”

He turned toward his son. “Variety. For thousands of years, humans have survived because they adapted their ways of living to the environments in which they found themselves.”

“But things have changed, Nate. These... these ‘augmentations’ we’ve devised for our-selves... they don’t make us unique or equip us for changing circumstances. At one point in time, man could be supremely independent; he could live off the land, surviving by the sweat of his brow. Now, son,” his father chuckled sadly, “he can’t even go six weeks without a refill of biop-lasm.”

Nate felt his father’s hand on his shoulder. “You know I don’t hate technology. And you know your mother and I want to give you every opportunity for the future. But we also want you to develop the body with which you were born. We want you to learn how to be independent-- how to adapt. That is why we choose to be different.”

Nate sat, thinking over his father’s words. He knew his parent was right... but the ramifications were so hard to accept...

Exhausted from the stress of the day, he slumped over and fell asleep.

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Nate awoke with a start, throwing the remote control off his chest with a startled yelp. The device fell to the ground, inadvertently forcing the telepanel on. Nate breathed heavily for a few moments, slowly gathering his shattered thoughts. Suddenly, he focused on the telepanel. The newswoman had an unusually anxious tone in her voice.
“...all signs point to a malformed protein that contaminated the latest shipment. Casualties continue to mount as the investigation continues. Police and firefighters have struggled to maintain order as their own implants break down; civil services have been heavily equipped with bioplasm augments since the Standardization Act of 2037...”

Nate noticed the woman’s bioplasm arm hanging awkwardly at her side. The device’s typical blue glow had been replaced with a sickly, pallid green. Something was wrong.

Nate’s father burst from his office, running towards the front door. “Nate!” he said, noticing his son. “There’s been an accident... the bioplasm shipment was tainted. People are dying all over the city... I’m heading to the clinic to see what I can do. Don’t leave the house, son; you’ll be safe here!”

“Wait, Dad!” Nate yelled, sprinting after his father. “What about Mom?”

But his father was gone. Nate listened as the doctor’s vehicle roared out of the garage. A moment of indecision, and Nate sprang for his own jacket. He was not going to cower in a corner until the crisis was over.

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Smoke rose over the Weirz’ neighborhood, its dark tendrils obscuring the moon. Distant cries for help mingled with the stench of burning diesel as Nate stumbled down the front steps. He ran into the middle of the street, stopping to look at the hovercar that had smashed into the lamppost outside his house. Its driver-side door hung open.

“Help... me...”

Nate whirléd around. Scant yards away from the wrecked car lay its former driver. The injured adolescent lay disabled on the sidewalk, every one of his augmentations inert. The teen’s eyes -- one tinged green with the pallor of infected bioplasm -- stared pleadingly at Nate. Nate gasped. It was “The Cyborg:” Trevor.

A maelstrom of emotions arose within Nate’s heart. The pity he had felt for helpless mankind was nearly overwhelmed when he glimpsed his paralyzed oppressor. The repressed rage of a decade finally welled to the surface in a tidal wave of fury, flushing Nate’s cheeks and quickening his pulse. The bully’s ignorance, his refusal to accept Nate’s uniqueness, fiercely compelled Nate to leave the boy where he lay.

Trevor’s dimming eyes saw a hand reach down into view. He looked upward into the face of Nate, whose eyes were smiling behind his thick glasses. “Come on,” said Nate. “Let’s get you to a hospital.”

Nate’s anger withered as he heaved the boy off the ground. He had never been more thankful to be different.
Sun glinted through the window, bathing Bill Menendez in warmth. Gradually, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and shuffled out of bed, pulling on a worn corduroy robe before settling at his desk to start the day. The surface was cluttered, but within the mess, he could always find three things: wallet, keychain, and - most importantly - his Pocket Buddy X340 Pro, affectionately known to him, and the world at large, as the pBud.

pBuds were nearly ubiquitous - but then, their success had been guaranteed from the start. They’d simply taken so many widely used gadgets - music players, cell phones, PDAs, BlackBerries - and synthesized them. True, it had taken a while for the device to catch on, and, for some time, using a pBud was tantamount to screaming “nerd!” Bill knew from experience. An early adopter, he remembered the “techie” label he’d earned - and how things had changed.

It started with WNAI: Worldwide Networks Access Initiative. WNAI was, in fact, the child of pBud-manufacturer NewBud Technologies. After years of stagnant sales and public rejection, they realized that the problem was one of access. So they passed legislation, designed infrastructure - the works - until, nearly five years ago, on July 4, 2032, the last switch was flipped, and the entirety of Planet Earth - from Antarctica to Beijing to Chicago - became utterly, perfectly, wired; blanketed in one Internet connection. From anywhere, people could now eagerly pull out their laptops, cell phones, or - of course - pBuds, connect to one of thousands of low-earth satellites, and access the ‘net. The effect was transformative: pBud sales shot up nearly tenfold in July alone. Now, in 2037, its popularity had further exploded as people’s reliance on the technology grew: Bill, a typical “budder,” checked his email, called friends, browsed blogs, scanned headlines, everything - and all on one convenient device. It was technological nirvana. No longer was he part of an elite user group; the streets teemed with commuters in the “pBud pose” - head down, thumbs twitching. Focused on their tiny screens, they would bump into each other, then simply walk by without a word. Everyone understood: just “budding”.

After WNAI, the pBud quickly became more enhanced, changing from a temporary fad to a phenomenon guaranteed a place in history. New technologies made the pBud more omnipresent and powerful; bill used one now, joining millions in a morning ritual as wholesome as coffee and doughnuts: checking his Synapse.

The idea behind Synapse wasn’t new. “Social networking sites” - MySpace, Facebook, FriendNet - had provided digital social “hubs” for years; e-mail had existed longer still. But synapse went farther. Sure, you could send notes, post pictures, all the basics - but Synapse focused on your life itself, let you share it with everyone. Whenever Bill logged onto the Internet, everyone could see his precise location. Make a purchase with his credit chip? It appeared on Synapse instantly. In short, everything he did became common knowledge. His preapproved “friends” - which numbered into the thousands - could even attach their pBuds to virtual reality viewers and relive a simulation of his day, exquisitely rendered in 3D surround graphics.
Bill still wasn’t quite sure why he so loved the pBud and synapse. There wasn’t a vast, world-changing use for all this information, to be sure. It wasn’t life-changing or anything. But it was more than just fun. Somehow, he mused, I have to know. It’s beyond a desire, it’s a need, a lust for information. And it makes cyberspace more personal. For so long, those face-to-face relations were absent, but now screen names are people again. I know when they’re in the bathroom or eating breakfast or driving. It’s comforting.

An electronic chord sounded, followed by a simulated voice: “Welcome to Synapse, Bill Menendez. Two hundred thirty-two new alerts.” Bill began browsing his friends’ list of actions.

23:30 **Sonya** is enroute to **Italy** -

3:45 **Pete** is eating **cereal** -

4:00 Note from **Jill**: **whats up** -

7:10 **Julie** is in **kitchen** -

He touched Julie’s name and was transported to a page with her picture, her current location, even a simulated map of her last twenty-four hours’ movement.

“New voice message,” Bill commanded.

The voice responded. “Begin.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

Instantly, Julie replied: “Eggs. They’re ready.”

Bill headed downstairs, a sensor in the wall noting the presence of his pBud as he passed. Within seconds, his friends would get the message: 7:32 **Bill** is going **downstairs**.

“Morning, honey.” 7:33 **Bill** is in **kitchen** with **Julie**.

“Morning.” Julie doled out scrambled eggs and they ate, with only a crunch of food or beep of Synapsing occasionally interrupting the permeating silence.

**Bill**: You must leave in one minute. “Gotta go, sweetheart. Delicious eggs.”

“Mmm.” Julie’s head stayed down, her fingers tapping on the screen.

7:42 **Bill** is traveling (touch here to track on map).
Bill sat, feet on desk, savoring his lunch break. His job was stressful - even on the best days, he welcomed the reprieve eagerly. And, of course, it was a prime opportunity to check his Synapse. He pulled out his pBud - noted, wryly, that many of his coworkers had already done likewise - and logged on.

Bill’s friends had been quiet this morning. His eyes glazed as he skimmed their list of activities. Becoming, for some reason, bored with their mundane lives, he decided, impetuously, to send a voice mail to Julie. “Hi hon,” he dictated after navigating to her profile. “Just wanted to say ‘love you.’ See you tonight.”

It was the type of spontaneous gesture she’d love. They weren’t hopeless romantics - both were high-level professionals, shining beacons of the American Dream - but they appreciated each other. They’d met by accident - become smitten in an elevator - and Julie kept trying to recapture that spontaneity, that... mystery, almost. It wasn’t as important to Bill, but still, he did his best, Synapsing her random notes or virtual reality beach trips.

After sending his message, he scanned Julie’s profile - and noticed something odd. Julie seemed to be doing...nothing! Indeed, after “8:02 Julie is driving,” her list of events stopped. Surely she wasn’t still in the car! “Display car accidents, Julie’s route to work,” he pronounced, trying to keep calm.

“None found.”

Good. Besides, he reasoned, heart still racing, hospitals update a patient’s Synapse as standard procedure, to keep one’s friends in the know. Then what’s happening? She should be at work. Eating lunch. There should be countless notifications. And then he noticed at the top of the page: “8:04 Julie has disabled Autofeed updating.”

Disabled Autofeed?

Unheard of. Either she was in trouble, or she was hiding something. Something illegal? Shameful? Or - he shuddered - another man. Would she do that to him? Well, there was a way to find out.

“Display Julie’s recent communications.”

Bill skimmed the extensive list, looking at pictures of those who’d recently sent her messages. An unfamiliar face instantly jumped out at him: last night, a Tom Borovsky had left Julie a note: “See you tomorrow at nine - don’t forget!” And Mr. Borovsky’s smiling visage appeared frequently down the page of messages. Well, well, Bill thought. Nice to meet you too, Mr. Borovksy.

“Display previous communication between Julie and Tom.”

His pBud paused, searching. “Sorry, all such messages are marked as private.”
Private? Yes, Synapse had been designed to maintain privacy if one wanted, to simply be visible to a select few - but a tacit understanding existed that this was not its purpose; the idea of Synapse was to connect, and with vigor.

There would certainly be a litter chat tonight. How could she treat him this way? It was...insane. Julie was keeping things from him Julie, keeping things from him! Bill shook his head, disgusted. I know exactly what time my boss got up this morning. I know when my ex-girlfriend’s sister went to Target - and what she bought. I know where a guy I bumped into on the subway is spending vacation! And yet here was Julie, his own wife, shutting him out!

Of course, it was more than that. It was another guy, Bill could be sure of that. Another guy, not me. Julie doesn’t love me anymore. Two could play at this game, then. Fine. She wants to leave me, let her. I’ll survive. Pack up, move out tonight. Clean and quick. Let Tom take care of her.

Suddenly, Bill’s mind snapped itself into check. There could be other explanations, some part of his brain reminded him. Why not get Julie’s story? Tom could be a coworker. Friend. Doctor. Anything!

But then, at this point it no longer mattered. Tom was the lesser betrayal; Bill realized that now. He did care about being shut out. It was that she had something private, something she was hiding from him. And she had no right to do that.

12:20 Bill has removed Julie from his friends -

No right at all.
When the inside of her eyelids glowed from the dawning sunlight, Panya grudgingly realized she couldn’t fall back into sweet slumber. Disparaging the cheerful chortle of the mockingbird outside her window, she threw her blankets to the side of her heated bed and felt the cool morning air pour over her. She yawned, stretching a leg over the bedside. Before her feet touched the glossy hardwood floor, preheated slippers swept over her toes. Panya smirked at her tussled reflection and pushed the button to open the window, admitting her anxious cat. “Good morning, Sonnet,” Panya greeted. The tabby purred and rubbed against her.

A blinding blaze stabbed Panya’s eyes; it was the obnoxious glare of the rings. Panya squinted and pursed her lips at the uninviting glint of civilization in the sky. Why did she have to live on Earth? Why couldn’t she hover around the planet like them? Ringers didn’t have to tolerate the intrusion of their harsh reflection—or endure the drain of supplies they constantly demanded from the surface. No, Ringers just sublimely floated in their lofty perch, secure in the snub realization that they were rich enough to inhabit the colossal, man-made superstructure that encircled the earth. A seething envy housed inside Panya for the Ringers who flaunted their exclusive access to purified air, perfectly synthesized foods, and then taunted the culture of those suffering the “natural conditions” beneath them. Panya evaluated her meager surroundings and imagined how the lavish bedroom of a Ringer might appear. It probably had HD holographic platforms and picture walls instead of the paltry plasma projections on the retro roll-up computer screens in her room. She sighed, closed the window, and followed Sonnet out the automatic door.

Still tired and agitated, Panya arrived at school and was hurriedly approached by her longtime friend Harley. “Panya! Have you heard?”

“Heard what?”

Harley draped her arm around Panya’s shoulder. “There’s a new girl—a foreign exchange student. I heard she’s gray, and she barely speaks English.”

“Where’s she from?”

“The rings.” Panya’s eyes darted to her friend. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I thought.”

“What’s her name?” Panya asked, curious to identify her new enemy.

“Wazozo or something . . . they say she’s already strutting around like she owns the place.” Harley continued to pull Panya through the busy hallways and to spill more juicy gossip about the nouveau Ringer. It wasn’t until second class that Panya spied the infamous visitor. On a shortcut through the courtyard, Panya glimpsed a strangely dressed girl sitting alone. As Panya approached the foreigner, two bright eyes examined her. “So
you’re the Ringer,” Panya stated. The disappointed stranger understood enough English to recognize the derision. Her expression turned solemn. She nodded.

Her voice was light but thick with an alien accent. “Pleaze, I no understand thiz,” she said, holding out the plasma Personal Managerial Organizer that displayed her schedule.

Panya took the PMO and surveyed it. “Great.” Panya twisted her mouth. “You’re in my Universal Geography class. Come on,” she said, gesturing for the girl to follow, “the chime’s gonna ring.” The girl weakly smiled, but it was obvious from her blank expression that she didn’t understand. Panya found it hard to believe that this vulnerable girl fit her arrogant reputation. It was certainly a clever ruse.

They walked silently until the visitor quietly stuttered, “What’z name?”

“Panya.”

Nodding in understanding, “Me Azoko,” she replied as she pressed her chin tighter to her chest. Meekly, she offered the PMO to Panya and quietly said, “Help find Zulu time, pleaze.”

Panya took the PMO and changed the instrument to display Interuniversal military time. “How long will you be on Earth?” she asked, returning the adjusted schedule.

“August 13, 2242.”

“All year then.” On Azoko’s arm, Panya eyed a bangle etched in Ringling “Translator,” Azoko explained nervously, quickly removing the thin accessory and handing it to Panya. Panya inspected the advanced technology. The delicate device housed a crushed diamond projector in a crystalline transparent face. “It ziz old; no good for me. My English ziz not zo good, but I learn.”

Stopping at the doorway, Azoko said, “I feel . . . grateful to make friendz with Panzya. I like to talk you much.”

Panya didn’t know what to say.

“You have text addrezz? I understand better writing.”

Panya entered her text address on Azoko’s PMO.

“Thank you, Panzya.” Azoko smiled and continued into the classroom.

At lunch, a group of her friends approached Panya. “Panya, you talked to her?”

“We saw you exchanging addies,” Harley accused with a sharp finger. “You’re not gonna become like her, are you?”
“She needed help, so I helped her.”

“She’s just using you.”

Panya squirmed.

“We’re all we’ve got, Panya! If we lose you, what will happen to us?” The girls nodded and shot her a sad look.

Panya sighed. “I won’t let that happen. Believe me, I know how Ringers are.”

Panya was one of the last students to leave after school. As she rode the placid, moving hallway, she heard strange sounds from a nearby classroom. She slipped off the transport, peeked inside, and saw Azoko watching a projection from her translator of some kids laughing and talking in Ringling. Panya pressed against the outside wall and listened to the halting language. Just then, the talking stopped and restarted, translated by Azoko’s wristband into English. Panya was transfixed. A girl said, “Azoko, dear, why are you going? My mom says surfacists will cut off your hand to steal your translator. I’m afraid for you. Please be careful, okay? Bye.”

Then a boy’s voice said, “I love you so much, Azoko! I know you’ll blow Earthlings away with your craziness. Just don’t let them think we’re all like you, okay? Just kidding—”

The holographic collection was Azoko’s friends from the rings saying goodbye. Panya peered around the doorway and watched the kids dancing, kissing the camera, waving. Though the room was dim, Panya saw Azoko wiping tears from her bright eyes. She looked up and saw Panya standing at the door. Embarrassed, Azoko chuckled. “I ziz sorry.”

“Why?” Panya asked, stepping into the room.

“Thiz surprise waz for make me happy, but make me mizz them.” she said, wiping her cheeks more vigorously. “I send text for you. You receive?”

Panya searched her PMO and opened the recently received message:

“Panya, I know not what to say . . . I have words full of my heart. At first, thank you for be nice to me. I was afraid to talk because some no like me. But you remove my flightness (It’s spelled right? sorry . . . ). and make us such a pleasant friends. Thank you very very much. You are my cheerleader for me. I am glad you are my friend. Really thank you.”

Panya was speechless. Azoko was not at all like Panya’s concept of Ringlings. Azoko was sweet, humble, compassionate, and forgiving. “That’s really nice, Azoko. Thank you.” Azoko nodded and looked back at the projection. “Listen,” Panya said, “if you need any help with English, just let me know, okay?”
“Okay. Thank you, Panzya. I have too much Universal Geography homework. Calculus’s homework ziz much good than that because Calculus ziz most number and sign. These same as Rings.”

“Well, want to come to my house or something? I can help you with your homework.”

Azoko’s face lit up. “Thank you, Panzya! You very kind!”

Panya helped Azoko with English and Universal Geography, and Azoko helped Panya with Calculus. Azoko liked Panya’s parents, her room, and she loved Sonnet. Supper was beef stroganoff. Azoko politely observed the unfamiliar dish, took a small, cautious taste, and then exclaimed, “Oh! Thiz ziz my favorite!” Everyone laughed. Azoko enjoyed seconds.

The next day, Panya invited Azoko to sit with her indignant friends at lunch. Surveying their offended faces, Panya stated, “Guys, this is Azoko. I know what you’re thinking, but we were wrong. She doesn’t look down on us at all.”

“Oh no!” Azoko chimed in. “Rings have centrifugal gravity. Everywhere, Ringlings only looking up to earth.” She laughed, pointing toward the ceiling.

Grasping the concept, Harley was the first to start the chuckle that spread around the table. In time, other kids realized that Azoko didn’t consider herself as superior. In fact, she was a gentle spirit who loved all of Earth’s “natural pleasures,” unavailable in the rings. She marveled at insects, birds, and animals. She relished the fragrance of untreated oxygen, was delighted by rain and wind; and she enjoyed “real” food—maybe too much, since tiny Azoko was always horrified that she was getting “fat.”

Too soon, the sad time came for Azoko to return home. . . . At the goodbye party, Panya presented her present—a holotube of recorded well-wishes from Azoko’s many surface friends.

When the inside of Panya’s eyelids glowed from the intruding sunlight, she hopped from her bed to admire the glimmer of the civilization of her best friend, who shined like a light.
Under a Concrete Sky

By: David Middlemiss

4th Place

Topic - Nutrition

The antiquated lift doors slid open, the soft squealing, an echo of a time before technology had eliminated such irritations. Stepping out of the cradling light, I paused to allow my eyes to adjust. Street lamps hung from above, cleaving wide rents through the surrounding dark, but they were few and far between. More than one had been broken, never to be repaired: an indication of how little the City cared, after all out of sight, out of mind.

But despite the inconvenience, the lack of light was an unlikely ally. The fewer people who saw me tonight the better. If word reached my peers that I was here it would raise awkward questions, questions that might well lead to my death, politically at least.

This street was so different from the one above that I momentarily entertained the notion that I was in a different world. In a sense I was, the world as it had been twenty years ago, though back then these streets had not been scarred with graffiti or been so devoid of humanity.

I moved uneasily, staying close to the middle of the street. Just because I couldn’t see anyone did not mean no one was there. As a D.A. I knew what lived down here. Not for nothing had the lower streets been renamed Hell, by those who lived above.

Constructing the streets above had been intended to improve the city, a visionary solution to the overwhelming congestion, on which the city had been slowly choking. It had had some limited success, though not in the way that had been imagined. Certain areas of the lower streets had become expressways across the city. However, in general, the problem had just moved one level up. The bustle and life that had once thronged along these streets now flowed above me. Looking around me, I didn’t think it was worth it.

At first the development had been welcomed but as the novelty wore off people began to tire of life under a concrete sky. The upper streets had been designed to filter natural light to the lower level, but people would rather have an open sky above them, at least as open as a city full of sky scrapers allowed. I guess we still have that primitive wild instinct in us. As the project was expanded, businesses and their customers inevitably abandoned the lower streets and this twilight world was created.

But what had been a death blow for the lower streets was a rebirth for the rest of the city. When the lower level was abandoned it was heralded as an opportunity to bury the city’s old problems.

Gangs, drugs, violence had been ruthlessly targeted, though they were still the life-blood of Hell. Other vices too had been targeted. With a fresh canvas to work on, the city had been repainted as an artistic and cultural haven. Obesity was another cancer dealt to in the city’s rebirth. For too long it had been a blight on society. Over three quarters of the
population had been overweight or obese. The internet, robotics and the Link Pods had all conspired to create a culture of indolence. It was all too easy to live and work without leaving the house or even your chair. As modern lifestyles had become increasingly frantic, people had come to depend on fast and pre cooked food. Things had improved a little since the early years of the new millennium and some of that food had been made quite nutritious, but the vast majority had remained unhealthy.

Now fast food was totally was shunned by the general population. Sure the odd sweetcap would still be eaten at a special occasion but by and large fruit replaced chocolate, chips and cake had given way to a healthy serving of vegetables and organic fruit juices ruled where once Coca-Cola had been king. To be seen eating such junk food was a sign of weakness now, a silent admission that you did not respect the need for change: social suicide. Against all the odds the revolution had worked, today the city had one of the lowest obesity rates in the country.

But this transformation was not simply the result of changing attitudes; legislation had played its part as politicians jumped on the bandwagon of social rebirth. Work hours had been tightly regulated to ensure that people had time to spend with their families, and prepare a nutritious meal of course. I-Marts and other vendors were banned from advertising unhealthy food and anything they sold had to include prominent health warnings. In many ways it was similar to the campaign waged against cigarettes, before they had been totally banned in 2019. Not that prohibition seemed necessary this time round. Most stores did not bother with such stock anymore.

A clatter in the alley to my left snapped me out of my recollections. Foolish, I told myself to be daydreaming down here. My hand strayed to my jacket pocket. The weight there reassured me. My reflexes might not be as sharp as they once were, but my years on these streets had taught me how to use a gun and it was not something you forgot in a hurry. I quickened my pace to leave the alley behind. I heard nothing else. Whatever or whoever lurked within those shadows had obviously decided I was not worth the trouble. Perhaps it was only a stray cat or maybe some old bag lady rummaging through the trash, a reminder that the city had not really solved its problems, just hidden them.

At the next intersection I turned left. Ahead of me one of the express routes cut across my path, the racing hovercars forming a river of light in the shadowy underworld. It was an ever present reminder of all the wonder these streets had held, and lost. I followed the access way down under the street. Another ‘improvement’, a way to increase the flow of traffic and people, now a haven for those society had left behind. The light down here was almost non existent. Where large spotlights once illuminated the tunnels, now only shattered bulbs remained. Three shapes huddled in the shadows. One rocking backwards and forwards, crooning, in the throws of a drug induced ecstasy. My hand rested well within my pocket as I wove between them.
I emerged into familiar territory. Once I had walked this street as a daily ritual. My goal was still some way off however. Anyone dealing in what I sought would be careful to stay well away from anything remotely related to the world above.

The closer I got, the stronger the cravings became. My body trembled in anticipation. It had been years, since my last fix, yet I could still recall the sheer pleasure after all this time. I had put aside my cravings, just like so much else, in favour of my wife and my career. You would think that after so long you would be free of an addiction, but not this one. For a while I thought I had broken free, but the cravings had returned. Over the years they had intensified, until at last the need for another fix, even just one more, had become irresistible. Had I been as strong as I made out publicly I would have sought help. Instead I was here, somewhere I had no business being, walking the lower streets.

I touched my wristband and the holographic display flickered into life: 11:52 p.m. I needed to hurry.

Finally I reached my destination, right where the inmate had said it would be. Light shone from the grimy windows cutting the street into rectangles. It seemed unnatural that such a place should be so well lit. I pushed open the door, something I had not had to do for many years. A man sat huddled in the corner, wrapped in a dirty grey coat, another stood, the counter a safety barrier between us. He looked up warily as I approached. Despite my shabby clothes he could tell I did not belong here. I gave his other patron another hurried glance, He had not moved.

My palms were sweating as I leaned forward and half whispered, “I need some coke.”

I felt shame at those words. The shame of one who knows he is betraying everything he has stood for, the trust of everyone who is dear to him. I wanted to walk out then, but I couldn’t, my hunger was so great.

“It will cost ya,” he replied with a sneering smile.

I knew too well that he was right. I also knew I had to have more.

“...and a Big Mac.”

Was that a look of triumph in his eyes as he asked, “Would you like fries with that?”
Do you know what it feels like when you think you’re being watched? Do you ever feel like you have no privacy? Well, imagine being the watcher. That is what I am. I am a Watcher, nothing more, and nothing less. Born into this world without a heart, a mind, or even a soul, I am nothing but a collection of circuits with one common mission. I am a Watcher, nothing more, and nothing less.

Master has informed us that today is reassignment day. Once every year, all of the Watchers are gathered together at Headquarters, located in the heart of Washington, D.C., to discuss our assignments. My last assignment, a young boy named Sam, was being monitored on suspicion of terrorism because he had once told his friends that he “was the bomb.” Officials took the phrase as a threat to local schools and assigned me to monitor the boy’s activity for the next six months. After only two months, however, Sam was taken into a local juvenile prison until further notice, and I was discharged from the job.

Master says that you can never be too careful, and that no human should ever be trusted. I dare not question his authority, but it is my belief that he himself is a human, and I have gathered reasonable evidence from watching him at Headquarters. For instance, my fellow Watchers are never given names. We are merely marked with a number on the backs of our wrists. I am Z-5-761R2. Master, however, harbors no such marking. Rather, he is given a name, which I have heard from you humans in this country is “President,” but I have also heard him referred to as “Mr. Marcus.” The only thing strange about Master is that he can see the Watchers. Ordinarily, humans cannot see us, so that we may monitor you in secrecy. We Watchers are strictly forbidden to question Master’s origins, however, for fear that we will be disassembled if we are in any way defiant of Master’s orders.

Upon arriving at Headquarters after a painfully slow three-minute journey from Oklahoma via molecular transporter, I stopped to take in the scenery. The once paved streets of yesteryear were stripped away some forty or so years ago, and replaced by flat, metallic polar fields that allowed for smoothly flying hovercars to hum silently overhead. With the expansion of technology, it seems that the destruction of nature becomes more and more inevitable. A small, light object floated past my feet, which, upon inquiry of my data banks, I discovered was an abandoned shell of the now-extinct cicada. I held it up to the burning sunlight and let the dust from it fall back down upon my face, but my simulated skin held no true purpose other than to protect my hideous inner circuitry, and thus I felt nothing.

Within the next hour, all of us Watchers were ushered inside the Headquarters building. Paintings and holograms of other men named “President” lined the walls, some of which waved and saluted us as we passed them. All I could think about was my next assignment. All I wanted was another name to learn, another face to greet, another mission to fulfill, and another purpose in “life.”
I arrived at a house deep in the woods of a small village in Wyoming. Sent through a holoportal, I’m sure you would agree that the travel was much slower, but generally more pleasant and scenic than that of molecular transportation. As long as I could remain in one piece, I was satisfied. I reviewed my briefing cards for a moment before entering the building. The new assignment’s name was “Katie Turner,” age 16, some sort of human known as a “female.” The information showed that she was defiant of Master’s government and formed protest rallies at the holoconvention back in April, and has thus been submitted for close monitoring. I took one last look at the photo Master’s assistant handed me, and noticed a small hologram beaming from the sign in Katie’s hand. It read “Watchers are nothing, and thus should be treated as such. Only the living can walk this planet.” At that moment I realized this assignment was going to be a difficult one.

I grasped the handle to the house’s front door firmly, unnoticed by the fingerprint scanners, and thrust it open. A shadowy figure was sleeping quietly on the floor. I had to bend down to see the creature’s face, which I found to be that of a human. I glanced back to the photo in my hand. Sure enough, the creature was Katie. My circuits were whirring already as they relayed the message back to Master – “Subject found.” My mechanical body was functioning without my will of motion, once again confirming my soul-less existence.

Leaving Katie to rest, I wandered about the room. A particular photo hovering in front of the wall caught my attention. It showed a younger Katie, wearing a blue ribbon in her hair that fluttered in the background’s whispering winds. As I approached it, her eyes turned away from me. Intrigued, I plucked it from the wall and began inspecting its metallic frame. The outermost edges left several dents and scratches on my frame’s exterior, which (though I could not feel the damage) startled me. I dropped the frame. It shattered instantly, but the photo paper still levitated above the floor, as the younger Katie stared past me in horror.

The real Katie jumped to her feet and thrust her hands forward in a karate-chop stance. Her eyes scanned rapidly through the room, and soon pointed directly in my direction. However, it wasn’t me she was looking at. She was looking straight through me, to the shattered pieces littering the floor. She ran towards them, but I held my ground. She collided directly into me, and fell backwards on the floor.

Startled, and likely confused, Katie reached her hand out blindly into the air and began pounding her fist on my mechanical shin. My circuits began submitting their next message: “Subject is hostile.” Katie fought wildly at my feet, until a look of sudden understanding spread across her face.

“Get out, Watchers!!” she yelled as she rose to her feet cautiously.

I stepped back a few feet. “I am the only one here,” I said reassuringly, “and I’m not going to hurt you.”

Katie’s panic continued. “Where are you?” She swung her fist. “Get out of here!!!”
“I’m sorry,” I said. Hesitantly, I placed my hand on her trembling shoulder. “It is not my will to be here. I do not wish to have to do any of this,” I told her with all sincerity.

“How can I believe you,” she said, the panic in her voice beginning to subside, “when one of your own kind was responsible for the deaths of my parents back in 2054?” Katie pointed towards another photo on the wall.

My circuits tightened in my chest when I heard these words. You could tell me it was sympathy, but I would never believe you. Watchers are not supposed to have feelings, and thus my data logger recorded this event as a minor malfunction. However, when I turned to look at the photo, a sharp ringing sound filled my audio sensors. I fell to the floor, never taking my eyes off the photo. Two adult humans were staring back at me, each with the same horrified gaze that the photo of Katie had. I gripped the floor below me, which I envisioned would soon fall away.

Gathering my strength, I conjured a few words. “What were their names, Katie?”

Teary eyed, she shook her head. “You don’t need to know that information.”

I thought back to the briefing card, and the name listed on it. Katie Turner. I ran a quick search through my memory banks. There was one match. As I reviewed the file, the memories began flooding back to me. The people in the photo... a plot to overthrow Master... my assignment... the blood dripping down my metal hands...

The ringing in my sensors grew louder. My body froze as my circuits quickly relayed the information back to Headquarters. “Another malfunction. Run virus scan software.” But deep in my data processor, some information on humans seemed to burst forth. Humans have these things they call feelings. I was not meant to have these things, these “malfunctions” called feelings. Headquarters relayed a message back to my systems. Error in functioning. Terminate processor immediately. As I stood there, my body slowly shut itself down despite my struggles.

As my visual sensors began to fade, I managed to whisper a few last words. “I’m sorry, Katie.” In the end, Katie was given her revenge, and mankind took one more step towards getting privacy back from the watchers. I was a Watcher, nothing more, and nothing less. But I became something else. Even if only for a moment, I became human.
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