

Technology is Faster – Charlize, Year 9, VIC

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing myself for the start of a new day. Another day. Another day of Live Better.

A sweet, tinkling melody trills its way into my ears. *“Good morning Ash! Today is the 9th of April. It is currently 7:30 am. Please come to the breakfast table in 10 minutes.”*

I groan into my pillow, which sings, *“Get up! Get up! It’s 7:31!”*

My bed commences a series of mechanical manoeuvres without my consent, pushing me into a sitting position, then depositing me onto the floor with an unceremonious *whump!* I heave myself off the unmarked cream carpet and blunder in the direction of the bathroom, my eyes still half closed.

Upon picking up my toothbrush, elevator music drums in my head, pounding like a mallet. Oh how I’ve come to loathe this music. I imagine the lyrics to the wordless, random composition. Waiting, waiting. Flooding silence with awkward, erratic pulsations. Waiting, waiting. *Hurry up and brush your teeth!* It reverberates through my head, muting all other thoughts. I need a pain killer.

I step within the circle of marble adjacent to the bathtub. A series of chirrups fill the bathroom, echoing in a falsely cheerful manner. A pale green light emanates from the circle. *“Initiating Health Scan.”*

I close my eyes as a faint tickling sensation sweeps my body with a low sounding hum. *“A migraine has been detected. Would you like to be medicated?”*

“Yes,” I say, and there’s a beep. The effect is instantaneous. A feeling of serenity glides through my head and the pain is lifted away.

Sitting at the table, I eye the strange, humanoid beings that serve me breakfast. How is it that I have never questioned the things that run my life? Or am I just kidding myself? I’ve *always* questioned it; just in the mutinous way that I sometimes think other people do.

A spatula slides a fried egg and a rasher of glistening bacon onto my plate. The egg is golden and crispy around the edges, the yolk still runny; the bacon is a combination of sweet, salty and smoky. It is perfect - at an inhuman level. A beige, silicon hand sets a glass of warmed honey lemon next to my plate; I gulp it down, washing down the grease. The hand reappears as a rush of annoyance surges through my body. I’m perfectly capable of doing it myself.

I frown and clutch the glass, dodging the expectant automan. I slam the glass down in the sink. Too hard. It shatters, the larger shards hitting the metal surface with a clatter, the smaller fragments skittering across the sink. I stare transfixed at my own failure to wash a glass.

This is me now. I turn, not bothering to clean up. I know that it will be cleared before I blink.

At the front door, within a pocket of my bag I retrieve my phone - a small, clear object, glowing prettily at my touch. I tap into *On the Move!* and the screen displays the words, *Call a Vect-O-Pod?*

I press *Yes* and drop the phone back into my bag. As I step outside the house, I hear the chorus, *"Goodbye! Goodbye! Dinner will be ready upon your return!"*

Riding in the Vect-O-Pod is... is... well, it isn't. Not a thrum passes through my body as I whiz past other Vect-O-Pods going in every direction. I may as well be standing stock still. The only proof that I'm being transported is the scene that passes rapidly. No need for traffic lights - the Vect-O-Pods can detect when to stop or slow. It's a controlled and mathematically calculated system.

As the Vect-O-Pod pulls to a stop to allow a line of other vehicles to pass, I turn my head to face the glass on my side. My visual frame fills with the Expendables. The scene is desolate; hundreds of bedraggled men, women and wailing babies. They have gaunt and dirtied faces; bloodshot eyes stare at me pleadingly... or is it derision I see?

My breath catches and I want to turn away, unsee this - but I can't. They have nothing. They had everything. Before now.

A fight breaks out, a scuffle over - a scrawny cat? Horror seizes me as I watch them tear each other apart, mouths open as though ready to bite into that poor, mangy creature.

I touch a finger to the inside of my left wrist, followed by a touch to my right temple. I am still watching as the glass from which I look slowly turns an opaque white, obscuring my view.

What you don't see can't hurt you.

The only noise I hear as I walk towards my workspace is the *tap tap* of my high heels and the muted *krrrr* of Vect-O-Pods outside the clear dome-shaped building. I settle down, sliding into the chair which sounds a pleasant *"ding!"* of approval, gliding forward so that I am ergonomically seated in front of the desk. I initiate computer startup by waving my left hand across the empty space in front of me. My hologram appears, however the usual screen is obliterated by a few words that would forever change my life.

"We regret to inform you that you are no longer needed at Live Better Corporation. Please leave the building, immediately."

I stare at the words. Confounded by the message. The message, for me. I've seen it happen before. People leaving, their heads bowed, silently praying that they don't become an Expendable. There is no return.

I push back from my chair, ignoring the button used to instantly manoeuvre the chair back. I stand and snatch up my purse, marching to the reception.

"Hello, I would like to speak to the boss." I keep my voice level, loud, clear, but level.

The lady looks up from the desk. Her eyes are glassy, her hair perfectly smooth and her voice seems to vibrate in the air.

“Hello! How may I help you?” Her hands, a pearly cream, position themselves elegantly in an overlap as she blinks three times, awaiting.

“I would like to speak to the boss,” I repeat, trying to compose myself.

She blinks, in a terrifying slow process and I’m sure I hear a faint whir. She cocks her head. I refrain from shuddering.

“Whatever you would like to tell Mr Herondale, you may tell me.” She smiles patronisingly and I feel heat creep from my neck. Her porcelain lips are strangely free of crevices, no dips or slight wrinkles apparent.

“No uh... I need to talk to Mr Herondale,” I say, and mentally kick myself for hesitating.

Her smile remains, however her tone is sharper, “Mr Herondale does not have time to talk to people.” She repeats, “Whatever you would like to tell Mr Herondale, you may tell me.”

I freeze, then return to my senses, matching her placid smile with one of my own. “Okay then. I would like to request for my job back.”

Blink. “I’m *very* sorry, but that’s simply not possible.”

“Why?” I snap. “I am diligent. I am observant. I work fast ...” My voice cracks, giving me away. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

But robots can’t comprehend emotion - it’s the only element that has stumped so many scientists and engineers, so she merely gives that infuriating smile and says, “But technology,” her voice soft, “is faster.”