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Short Story

I swear school gets longer and more tedious as each day goes by. Even though the New Government recently renovated the building, and it was quite literally shiny and new, it seemed that the renovations were nothing but a thin veneer that barely hid what the school really is from view. The fact was, like the New Government, nothing had changed but the outside. I suppose one thing was different: Civic Reconstruction classes. The New Government designed these classes in order to instill in the youth the value of unification. What they heavily endorse is “the principles of working together and with the government to make our world a better place.” Though now the world is hardly our world anymore. Now we cling to the landmasses and bodies of water we can still call our own with pride. Of course, inside we all feel the resentment of not having more or having all that we are used to. Most kids at school think of Civic Reconstruction classes as a blow off class to goof around in. My friends Tom and Daisy love it though. They are excited for the New Beginning that the New Government promises. Unlike me, they see happiness and prosperity in the coming years.

It’s finally lunch time. I walk into the lunchroom and scan for my friends. Daisy and Tom are already there. They are usually easy to spot because they dress in all white while the majority of the people in school, and everywhere else, wear darker colors, usually black or gray. Camper is with them. John Camper is very popular with the girls at school. This is mainly because he has a classical English accent. I must admit, his accent intrigues me too. Camper, no one calls him by his proper first name, has been living in our society for at least ten years and he

still has the accent. The accent is also very uncommon. Aside from Camper, the only time I've heard the classical English accent is in the old colorless, 2 dimensional films of the past. Though Camper would never admit to it, I believe he must watch the archival digital footage often in order to retain his style of speech.

As I walked closer to my friends, I could hear them chatting excitedly. Most likely they were making more plans about our upcoming boating trip and party. Almost unconsciously, I slowed my pace. The past month, the boating trip had been the central topic of conversation. And each day, it consumes a bit more of our conversations. Normally, I would be just as excited about the trip, but this year I often find myself hesitant to join in.

It was the last week in October. Normally, this time of year makes me really excited because my friends and I always go boating on the lake. We plan our trip so late in the year because it is the last weekend of the year that it is warm enough to go out on the lake. During the winter, the outdoors is especially dreary. Also, the lake is one of the few places left in our city where we can go out and be near trees, water, and just nature in general. The trip has become a tradition of ours. We started making the annual trip before we entered our A-level courses. Back then, Tom's parents would charter the boat. Now we go without any parents to party for a weekend. This year I am not excited. This year we won't all be together. This year, Aari will not be there.

Aari was the fifth member of our group and my closest friend. Aari and I have known each other almost our entire lives. We became friends when we first started schooling, and we have been best friends ever since. I always felt completely comfortable around Aari and I would tell him everything. When Aari died, I felt like I had lost a piece of myself. This boating trip is

going to be our first without him, and the nonstop chatter about the event makes me think about Aari constantly and it puts my mind in a haze. Aari left so suddenly. I have so many questions about what happened and why.

I was at Java shop. It almost seemed like the school administrators should count Java as an extra session of class since I had a hard time finding a face that was not familiar from school. Java was the new hang out. They specialized in edible flavored coffee beans. Their beans are unique because they are supposed to taste just as good as the ones grown from the ground even though they were manufactured in laboratories. The New Government is pushing a program to get people to eat manufactured food instead of traditionally grown food. Aari's mom still tries to grow some of her own food in her backyard. She is always complaining about how poor the soil is and how difficult it is to get anything to grow.

After waiting twenty minutes for Aari to show, I checked my cell. I scanned the network and I didn't see Aari's avatar. I figured the network must be down or his phone must have been acting up again, so I decided to send a text message to his phone. I never heard back from him. A few minutes later, an overly muscular guy we all called Future man came into the room. He started yelling and motioning excitedly about how he passed a car on the side of the road that looked like it had just been in an accident. He slowed down to see if he could see past the medics and police to see who was in the car or if there was a body in the medic truck when the car suddenly, and unexpectedly, burst into flames. "Out of nowhere! Just BLAM! And up it went." The rumor was that the heat from the explosion was so great, that it melted some of the paint on Future man's car. I've never cared enough to actually look at the car and check for evidence of melted paint.

Later on the news, there was a story about the same accident. The reporter briefly described the incident and a photograph of Aari appeared on the screen. According to the reporter, Aari had been driving the car alone, and he was the only fatality of the accident.

Police described the accident as a two-car collision. A man in a white car sped through a light, and he slammed into the victim's vehicle. The victim lost control of his vehicle and spun off the road. When the medics arrived at the scene, both parties were unconscious. The medics also found the victim in critical state. The medics immediately ran back to the medic truck to retrieve an Emergency Life Kit after establishing that the victim was in critical condition. As the medics headed back to the car, the explosion occurred. Police thoroughly searched the area, but found no traces or remains of the victim. When the person who ran initially caused the crash came to, his description and the medic's reports have confirmed that the victim was a seventeen-year-old young man named Aari.

After the report, I blanked out a bit. I vaguely remembered something about a memorial service and statistics of the number of recent car crashes in the area. There was never a specific reason given for the car suddenly exploding. The focus seemed to be about the size of the explosion, but no one seemed concerned about why it happened.

I slowly approached Camper, Tom, and Daisy and managed a smile. "Well if it isn't our own woman of mystery, Miss Marlene Dee" Camper greeted me.

"I'm so glad you finally showed up," said Daisy. "All of us are trying to work out the final details of this year's boat blast. I think it would look great if we all dressed in shades of white and cream. Tom thinks green would make a better color palette. And he has Camper convinced. But I know you would prefer my idea"

“Wait- color schemes?”

“I know! Sophisticated — God, I’m sophisticated! We decided to have a larger, more extravagant party since it’s our last year of A-levels. This party is going to be extra special. I sent details to your cell; so you can look them over whenever,” Daisy continued.

“Marlene, if you pick cream, this means we have a tie now.” Tom said.

“It’s too bad Aari isn’t here anymore,” Camper said. “He was always our tie breaker.”

We spent the rest of our lunch break reminiscing about the good times we had with Aari and we eventually all started talking about our upcoming boat party and how it would compare to other past parties.

That night I found myself at the scene of Aari’s accident. Only this time I was in the car with him. After we crashed, I started to smell gas. Suddenly the heat from a burst of flames set my face on fire and my lungs began to fill with smoke. I turned to the driver’s seat to reach out to Aari, only he was not in the car anymore. Suddenly music started to play. It was one of my favorite new songs.

My cell woke me up from the nightmare. My Dream Machine must have been malfunctioning, or maybe the network connection was down, because I programmed it to love and happiness for the night. Instead of going to a happy place from an old memory or one of my pre set dreams. I checked the cell and I had a new message. I had woken from one nightmare only to enter another one. Aari’s avatar filled the screen. At first, I thought it was some sort of cruel joke. Or someone had managed to take over Aari’s account. But I heard Aari’s voice clearly for the first time in months as his avatar spoke: *Serva Me, Servabota*.

“Who is this?” I messaged back.

“Marie Magdalene, I’m not dead. I’m in trapped. And soon, you, Camper, Daisy, and Tom might all be too.”

Then I woke up again. This time I woke up for real. I felt like my dead best friend was haunting me. I quickly checked my cell, but there were no messages. It seemed so real to me and Aari knew my real name. None of my friends knows my real name. What happened didn’t make any sense to me. Aari was dead, but it was impossible that I imagined the entire situation. Producing one’s own dreams is something of the past. I checked my Dream Machine. The network was up and running and had not dropped the connection all night.

The next day at school, I decided not to tell any of my friends what happened. I felt like I was crazy and I still did not quite believe what happened myself. I hoped that if I ignored it, it would go away. It didn’t. That night when I went to sleep, Aari came to visit me. “I did not die in that car wreck. Some men took me out of the car and then they set the car on fire. Marlene, I know you still don’t fully believe it is me but you have to trust me.” Aari told me that the next night I should put a marker next to my bed the next night. I did. And the next morning when I woke up, I had a bunch of letters and numbers on my arm. It seemed like nonsense writing and then I saw Aari’s network login. The other letters must have been his password. I hesitated. Have I truly lost my mind? After several deep breaths, I went to attempt to log in as Aari. If I could not log in, then I was crazy and hallucinating every night and drawing on myself. And if I could log in, then I was not crazy. Instead, I was just going to sleep every night and chatting it up with a friend of mine who died in an explosion several months ago. Neither of the two situations sounded particularly good, so I just decided to try to log in. Slowly and deliberately, I

typed in Aari's user name and password. To my shock, I logged in. I had access to everything in his account. I quickly logged out. Is Aari alive? If so, where is he? How did he get there? And how is he able to contact me?

That night I found myself in the car with Aari again. This time he didn't talk to me and he wouldn't look at me. As we cruised down the highway, Aari looked relaxed and carefree. His favorite songs filled the car. We headed into the city and came to a light. Aari began to slow down but as we neared it, the light turned green and Aari began to speed up again. Then suddenly I saw a white car speeding through the intersection. The man driving was looking right at us. His eyes were locked on our car and his expression showed no signs of him slowing down. He crashed into us and we spun out of control. I grabbed Aari's arm and screamed. Then everything went black.

My hearing came back first. I could not see anything but I was aware of a bright light over my head. I was aware that I was lying down, so I knew I was no longer in the car. When I came to, I was bumping slightly. I faintly heard voices talking. They were murmuring about a detonator. I tried to reach out for Aari, but I could not move my arm very far. I realized that I whatever I was lying on was also restraining me. I began to slowly open and close my eyes, trying to focus. I saw a lot of white. I slowly began to process other colors, but before I could make sense of them, and my surroundings, I started to drift into white. Or rather, white began to drift towards me. The last thing I remember seeing was two large, capital 'M's. They were somewhat entwined and seemed prominent and powerful. As they came closer, something was placed upon my face. Everything began to slowly fade back out again. As I drifted back into unconsciousness, I heard Aari's voice telling me to find out more. "The car crash wasn't an accident," his voice echoed.

At school, I asked Tom and Daisy if knew anything about the ‘M’s. When I awoke, they were the strongest thing in my memory. I began to think that I had seen them somewhere before but I could not remember where I saw them or what they were. Tom and Daisy generally kept up on things going up better than I did, and if this logo was anywhere near as important as I thought it was, they would be able to recognize it.

“Two large capital ‘M’s ?” questioned Daisy. “Hmm, where did you see the logo? That would help us figure it out.”

“I can’t remember,” I replied. “It just popped in my mind and because I can’t recall where it is from, it has been bothering me a lot.”

“I think I might know. It sounds like the Mind and Machine monogram,” said Tom.

“That sounds vaguely familiar,” I said. “What is that again?”

“Marlene,” Daisy said, exasperated. “Mind and Machine is one of the biggest programs the New Government started, and they are putting a large percentage of their funding into it. It’s the program that is working to improve artificial intelligence. I think they are creating an intelligent android that is able to think like we do.”

“Mind and Machine is also developing technology that can be implanted into us so that we can function better. There are rumors that soon we might have a way to stay connected to the network internally instead of always carrying around a cell.” Tom added.

“You really should pay more attention to current events,” Daisy said. “Plus, I think they even came to our school to do a presentation.”

After school, I did some research on Mind and Machine. The logo was the same one I saw the previous night and everything Tom and Daisy told me was true. I also learned that Mind and Machine was actually more or less the rebirth of the previous company who did similar things but the government shut down the company years ago for questionable and unethical testing methods. The company used preserved bodies of the dead as the bodies for their robots. Investigators discovered that the company could only account for the source of about 25% of the bodies they were using. They also did extensive human testing but refused to release any details about those practices or how their human testing affected their testers. The old government would not release the details of the results of the investigation, but they declared that the company posed more of a threat to the society than a benefit and they were promptly shut down. What was especially interesting about Mind and Machine was that their principal researchers and CEO draw from much of the same staff as the old company.

That night after I put on my Dream Machine, I awoke in a dimly lit room. Suddenly a bright light came on and I quickly realized two things. I was in a laboratory of sorts and I was restrained in my chair. Someone wearing a white lab coat came in reading documents. When he put them down, I saw the face. It was the man who crashed into Aari's car the night of the accident, and his lab coat had the Mind and Machine monogram on it.

“Well, subject A4, I hope you are ready for the testing of the lens we implanted in your eye. Assuming all goes well, we should be able to install a memory upgrade so you can store more information and stream it over our network faster and with improved quality.” The man paused and frowned at me. “I hope today we can do the testing without any more resistance from you. The company chose you because your strength and mind can help ease and expedite the testing process, so please do not use those same qualities to be a hindrance to the program.”

I tried to respond but I could not speak. I tried to move but I found that I had no control over my limbs.

“You’re not in control,” I said. Only I did not say it. It was Aari’s voice and it spoke aloud. I heard it and so did the man.

“Subject A4, if you do not cooperate, I will be forced to sedate you. And you have experience the sedation process enough times to know how painful the process is, just cooperate and it will makes better for both of us,” replied the man.

My head moved to the side. It passed a calendar and I saw the date and time were set to the present. This was not a flash back dream as I thought it was. Before I could think more about it, my head moved past a mirror. I gasped at what I saw. It was not my face but Aari’s. I’m surprised I was able to instantly recognized the face belong to Aari. The face was heavily altered. There were scars and stitches all around his eyes. He also did not have any eyelids. Only his eyeballs showed and just past Aari’s brown irises, I saw bits of metal and plastic surrounding the eye and seeming to hold it in place. There was a small, red light next to each eye. The one of the left was steady but the one on the right was blinking slowly. The hair was cut very short. In some places, there was no hair at all and instead, there were deep scars. One seemed relatively new and was sewn together.

“I see you are recording with both eyes now, though it seems you are having some trouble with the right one. I’ll run some tests to make sure your hardware is running properly and your software is up to date. Then we can review your video recordings and make sure the quality is up to standard. I trust that since you are currently connected to the network, that you are uploading the content as well? My computers indicate that though you appear to be

streaming across the network, nothing is streaming through your channel. The network appears to running functionally so I will check your internal memory after our tests.” The man looked away from the computer and addressed Aari head on. “Cheer up. Soon you will have some company in the laboratory. Perhaps the new subject will have a better attitude and will help you realize that you were not chosen as a punishment. You were chosen to help because you can help improve humanity and society. It seems the next target subject is someone from your old school in the Civic Reconstruction class. We are going to choose someone with high marks. Our hopes are that the new subject pays attention in class and fully believes in and supports the New Government’s mission of working together to make things better for us all. According to our scouts, several students from your former school are going to be throwing unsupervised parties this weekend. Perhaps if you are lucky, maybe one of your friends will be involved in an accident.”

The night before the boating party, I went to sleep hoping to hear more from Aari. I did not hear from Aari. I didn’t even dream at all. When I woke up in the morning, I was cranky and irritable. I checked my dream machine and my network. I had dropped my connection to the network while I was sleeping. My cell had one new message from unknown: “Cave mortis” I tried to log on the network with Aari’s account once more, but when I entered his information, I received a error message: “This account does not exist.”