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Essay 4: Short Story

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A Nightmare Realized

07.12.2045

Mara barely woke up again this morning. After trying to make sense of the weather from her open window, she gave up; the same grey clouds dominated the sky as they had for as long as she could remember. It's not like it used to be—those lazy mornings where she could stay in bed and let the sun wake her up slowly, listening to birds noisily chirping and lawnmowers cutting grass. Doubtful the children even understood what it was like to let the individual stalks of grass tickle your feet. But no more of this, this dwelling on the past, she corrected herself. To make life seem worthwhile now, she struggles to find something, anything, with meaning.

Almost mechanically, she rolls out of bed, goes into the bathroom and takes a shower. The morning ritual lasts two minutes, since every drop of water is precious and she must conserve to the best of her ability. Another five minutes to get dressed in her uniform, towel dry her hair and grab a Vita-Protein bar, the she adjusts her face mask and sunglasses and walks out the door.

16.04.1990

I jumped in the lake today after playing by the dock. After yelling at me for ten minutes for not swimming in the pool and maybe killing myself she made me go to the doctor. I got a shot and I think they were scared because when they looked at me, they had a skeptical look in their eyes. They said never to swim in the lake again, that I might get tetanus or something like that from all the pollution. I don't know what tetanus is, but I think it is bad. Especially since mom was really angry. She only gets angry when she is really scared or worried.

Is the water that dirty? It's only green. The water in the city is brown and it smells. It doesn't stink here and it isn't as gross. I thought when we went outside the city things were ok. But I guess I was wrong. I don't understand why people have to be so careful. Or why I can't swim in the lake. There are pictures of my parents here, when they were younger. They were swimming in the lake, and it looked like so much fun.

07.12.2045

Not that it is news to her anymore, but Mara faithfully attends the lecture series on how to act as a good citizen. How to recycle more effectively, how to conserve and the best part of the session: new ways to reuse common household wastes. Every time it was something different, but the main idea never changed. It was sad, what mundane events now dominated her life.

"For the prolonged survival of the human race, we must all work together..." Her thoughts kept drifting. Not because she was tired, but from hearing practically the same speech—a few words had been changed here and there and a few sentences omitted since the last time she had heard it. The meeting was lasting longer than normal today. They probably are talking about harnessing a different source of energy. Or maybe they made the food taste better.

Due to all of the pollution, crops can't grow anymore, and natural food has become a thing of the past. Breakfast bars filled with any form of nutrient one could imagine. They tasted synthetic and disgusting. But there were very few overweight people now, both because no one could afford what, but also because there was no longing to eat more than what one needed. The whole system was designed to maximize the nutrition per unit of food so as to minimize the amount of time and energy spent on food preparation. Just like every other system that now existed. The poster that hung behind her desk read, "Maximize use. Minimize waste." It had never been motivational.

The applause brought Mara back into reality. She replaced her stoic expression with one of pride for her race and agreement with what was being said. After 15 years under these rigid regulations, it was not going to be her they pulled aside and institutionalized for lack of support of environmental safety.

09.08.1998

What was she talking about? Mom never seems to understand. It's never clear to her why I need to leave my bedroom light on all night long, why I need to take 30 minute showers, why I use aerosol cans to spray my hair. At first it begins with a joke: "When your kids grow up there will be nothing left; they will die before your eyes." And then she snaps quickly into her preaching mode and gives me twenty reasons why I should be more willing to use public transportation and recycle my Coke cans.

I keep reminding her of my age; sixteen-year-olds can't kill the environment single handedly, and I'm really not a bad person. She should see some of my friends. If she had known last night after the party Janelle threw the extra beer cans into the river, I would be restricted from ever seeing Janelle again. In fact, I think she'd care more about the state of the river than the fact that I got drunk last night.

07.12.2045

Walking into her office, Mara began organizing her desk and completing her daily routine. Methodically typing her assigned letters, notes and references, she moved through her day seamlessly. It was not distinguishable from any other day. Nothing interesting happened—unless one could count the new flavor of nutrition bars that arrived in the vending machine.

At four o'clock the lights shut off and everyone left. There wasn't enough power to work more than six hours in a day. And there wasn't really enough work either since most of the jobs had been eliminated after it was determined they cost the environment too much in pollution. As a result the majority of the population worked simple, meaningless jobs. And Mara knew that she was one of them, a part of the majority.

30.06.2007

I finally have my first real job, the one I'll probably have for the rest of my life. With my mechanical engineering degree, I am working on a project to reduce the amount of pollution in the environment from automobiles while maximizing the amount of power we get out of each one. With all technical information aside, I'm trying to make a car that is faster and whose impact on the environment is less harmful.

Although it is mostly the chance to work with an all-star mechanics team that made me interested in this job, I think Mom ignored my main motivation, thinking I'm focusing on the environment. She no longer lectures me about how I need to take care of the nature. The job gives her a sense that she has won. And while a few years ago I would have made sure she knew the job was based on my career goals rather than her aspirations for me, the important thing is that for the first time in my life she approves of what I am doing.

07.12.2045

Exiting through the revolving doors, Mara begins to feel her age. At 63, she's not old, but she's not as spry as she once was. And the five miles she must walk to work are weighing on her every day. Five miles for a small stipend that she, at her age, could get from the government anyway, without the job. Five miles for work as what used to be called a secretary, but now they glamorize the position with the title of Administrative Assistant.

It wasn't amusing any longer, these games that they played. The camera watching her every move inside her own house. But mostly, it was the lack of human interaction that was getting to her. When was the last time anyone other than the girl whose desk was opposite to hers in the office said more than hello? She was lonely and tired. Tired of the lack of hope.

11.03.2027

To be honest, this was the most frustrating day of my life. My entire division was shut down. Apparently because hybrid cars are deemed as environmentally safe as they can be, my team is no longer needed. Most people are not able to travel anyway so the market for the cars has also diminished.

I am assured there will be a position for me at the lab still, where I am sure I'll push papers and sign on the dotted line and summarize other people's reports. Regardless, the investigative work I love has been taken from me and I no longer have anything of my own.

It appears as though government restrictions on household pollution and recycling might allow Big Brother to have a constant view of my activities. My privacy also is about to be taken from me. I can't decide what will be worse, the loss of my freedom to make my own money in a way that I choose or the loss of my own space.

07.12.2045

After an hour of television, some scrolling text discussing the possibility of finding a new green planet where humans could relocate, Mara readied herself for bed. She felt like reading a novel, but was allotted no more power for the evening and was out of her solar power reserves. Also, she had already read her supply of books multiple times; anymore, no press was allowed to waste paper creating art. The lack of reading made falling asleep a longer process.

Perhaps due to the exhaustion, her sleep was comforting. She dreamt, a happy dream, where a world existed that had not yet been destroyed. A world where people could swim in lakes could walk outside without a shield protecting their lungs from whatever chemicals might be lingering in the air. And no, it wasn't some distant planet containing a second chance for the human race. Instead, it was a picture of Earth before humans polluted to the point of no return and exploited any natural resource to be found. And it was beautiful.

08.12.2045

I woke up from my dream, and found the ruin and destruction was still there, outside my window. I realized there is nothing left. I am alone in this world full of automated people. And I too lack a personality. Nobody speaks to anyone anymore. All is about one's own survival, and no, it is not a drastic mode of survival of the fittest, it is about helping the human race survive. But not including an effort to save a culture, a history, a work of art. The effort for our salvation deals only with life itself.

I realize that those added things in life that caused us to exploit the beauty from which we survived, the selfishness that drove us to use the environment until there was nothing left. It is too late now, and I live, in this nightmare that is Earth.

08.12.2045

Instead of the following her mundane preparations to leave the house that day, Mara got dressed, put on shoes and ran out the door. Not for a second did she hesitate to put on her face mask for protection from the pollution. She just ran. When the sidewalk stopped, she was at the waterfront. A body of greenish-brown filth, the water represented the worst of human attack on the environment. Drawing in a deep breath of carbon dioxide and mercury as well as oxygen, Mara jumped in the bay and enjoyed one final swim.