

What Life Could've Been**By: Anna-Lisa Barrett:**

“Goodness, so many packages today. I can’t fathom it.” I whine as my cat purrs at the door. I smile at her, “yes, we will get out of this dungeon of a machine in a second hold on now, let me stop this.”

I grab onto the handle, and hit the speaker button, “Here! Stop here!” I scream. The ramshackle comes to a halt, “door open Ms. Liddy?” The ramshackle speaks. I nod, “Yes please. Let me just grab my mask.”

I throw my bottles of water around the ramshackle trying to find my mask. I sigh in defeat. I turn to face my cat who just tilts her head to look up at me. I chuckle, “you’d think I would wake up and realize after fifteen years to grab a mask huh Maislee.” I shake my head, “I mean it’s just the both of us, and you’re a cat, I highly doubt there’s any real danger here without a mask, what do you think Mais?”

She sneezes in response and I laugh, “You just want to go outside I know. Alright, open the door please!” I say to the ramshackle once again. The door then comes down and I take a deep breath looking outside. The year is 2035, and the world is completely different than when I was a child. Sometimes I wish to go back to when I was born back in 2015, and actually remember a time where everything was normal, and more people pleasing, instead of this. Barely any real human interaction, or any proper work for any human being.

I sit down underneath the umbrella that pops up from the bottom of the ramshackle to protect Maislee and I from the beating sun. I look across at the mountain in front of me, seeing

the lack of snow standing on the tip of it and sigh, “this used to be filled with snow y’know Maislee? That’s what papa used to tell me.”

She purrs in response and I look down and close my eyes. I try to imagine how the world used to look before I was born, or before the disease that took control of everyone in 2020 when I was only five years old. My papa told me everything, the trees were greener, everyone was faster, no one had a mask on, and everything just felt normal.

“Everyone had a place back then Maislee, that’s what he told me.” I say to her as I continue to stare at the mountain, “everyone had some sort of routine, whether it would be going to school or going to work, and now? You’re even lucky to find some sort of work that wasn’t taken over by machines.”

I begin laughing as I look up at the ramshackle, “I mean hell, I can barely say I am working. I don’t go and deliver the packages, I just sit in there, and let the ramshackle do all the hard work. I just move handles in order for the cranes to pick up the packages and drop them on their door steps. Jacques said very soon, they are making a new ramshackle model y’know? A model that can do everything on their own, no need for a human being to move the handles inside anymore. So, I’ll be out of work within the next year. Add me to the statistic of 85 million people that lost their job between 2025 to now.”

I take a deep breath, trying to hold back the tears as I think about my inevitable future. “Y’know what else Mais?” I say, “I should’ve listened to papa before he died.” I think about my father a lot, especially within the last few years. He died when I was fifteen years old from cardiac arrest due to the stress instilled in him from both himself and my mother losing their jobs. I close my eyes once again, and begin thinking about the day he lost his job, the beginning of the diminishing of my family.

October 2030:

“Ray!” I heard my mother screaming at my father, “what happened? Why are you home so early? Ray! Answer me!”

“Not now! Stop yelling at me, woman.” I heard him screaming back at her, “I need time for myself.”

“Ray! Don’t you walk away from me!” She screamed at him as she followed him into their bedroom.

I slowly tip-toed toward their bedroom door, and pressed my ear onto the door trying to hear their conversation, but by the sounds of their yells, it wasn’t a good conversation.

“Ray! For the love of God talk to me! I am your wife!”

“Genevieve, please! Get out! Go check on Liddy, do something besides bother me right now!”

“Stop running away from me and what you’re feeling! Tell me what is going on! Why are you home from the hospital so early? You only worked six hours when you usually work twelve!”

All of a sudden, I heard my father chuckle and his voice began to crack, “I lost it Genny.. I lost everything..”

I heard my mother hesitate before she replied back to him, “W-what do you mean you lost everything Ray?”

“This world doesn’t need human surgeons anymore... Apparently robots are better at open-heart surgery than I am now. Go figure. One of the most important human jobs, the one no one thought would be lost in the world of technology, is now officially wiped out.”

“Oh Ray.. I am so sorry.”

“Sorry? I don't need sorry Genny, I need a damn job, and now? There's barely any human jobs anymore! No more physical labour, and whatever is left will be wiped out within the next five years. I have nothing, you have nothing anymore, we both have nothing!”

I heard my mother begin crying, “I-I am trying so hard to remain positive, but what can we do? I don't think I can do this anymore Ray... My job as a hairdresser, I know wasn't as important to your job saving people, but it was my life. Now some stupid robot in an apron is cutting hair.. We both lost our passions in life..”

“There's no more positivity Genny. We just have to make due, at least for Liddy's sake.”

“Oh my god Liddy, what about her future? Her post-secondary future! Will we have enough to get her by?”

My father began laughing, “What's the point Genny? Sincerely. It's not like when we were children back in the mid-90s. We were in classrooms, big smiles on our faces, learning with the entire class around us, and the teacher in front of us. Now tell me, when has Liddy ever had that experience? What? One year maybe? Back in 2019 when she was four, just starting kindergarten. She's been in and out of either being in a classroom to online her whole childhood, to now having her high school experience online. Also, with no jobs? Why does she need post-secondary for? High hopes for something that will never come.”

I closed my eyes as tears began spilling down my cheeks, my father was right. What was there to be hopeful for? At that time, my mother was the most positive and hopeful person I knew, but once my father lost his job, my mother lost the sparkle in her eye.

December 2030:

“Reuvert, Ray, Room 220.” I heard the robot speak as they led us to my father’s hospital room.

“Liddy...” My mother whispered. I looked up to her, “yes mama?” Your father must be fuming at this.” she said giggling.

I smiled, I haven’t heard her giggle in almost two months. I knew what she meant, my father being taken care of by the machines that took away his job to begin with.

“Reuvert Ray, Reuvert Genevieve, and Reuvert Liddy are here to visit you.” The robot said.

“Shush you, let them in!” I heard my father mumble.

The robot moved out of the way to allow my mother and I into his hospital room. He turned his head over at us, trying to smile at us. Mother and I tried smiling at him through our masks, but all he saw were our eyes crinkling.

“How are you feeling papa?” I asked him as I went to sit beside him.

“Ah... Not the best Liddy. Not the best..”

He looked up at my mother, and looked at me once again, “Liddy my sweet, can you go outside for one minute? I would like to talk to your mother alone.”

I nodded, “yes papa.” I got up from my seat and walked out of the hospital room. However, instead of leaving, I put my ear up to the door once again.

“So, how did the surgery go, Ray..? How many stints?” My mother asked.

“I’m dying Genny...” I heard my father say.

My eyes widened and I tried to gulp the big lump forming in my throat.

“D-dying? None of the robots said anything about you dying! Ray, is this some sick joke of yours?”

“Genevieve, why would I lie about death? Out of all things death. Of course those stupid robots wouldn't say anything. They only say what they are programmed to say. Besides, would you want to hear your husband is dying from a tinned machine with no emotions, or from him yourself, in his most vulnerable state.”

“Liddy needs to know! Why would you send her out of the room?”

“Genny... Let her believe I died peacefully in my sleep please. I don't need her to see me like this knowing I will die.”

I opened the door and stared at them with tears going down my cheeks, “you don't need to hide this anymore. I heard everything.”

“Liddy...” My father spoke, his voice was hoarse. Was it dehydration, or was it him slowly deteriorating to his own death, I have no idea. All I knew was my father was dying in front of me, and there was nothing they could do to stop him from dying, or nothing my mother and I could do.

I walked over to his bed and kneeled down beside him, “papa.. I thought robots could do everything right..”

He chuckled, “apparently, one malfunctioned during my surgery... Like I always said, we humans might malfunction, but we can still get the work done.”

I began crying even more than before. My mother kneeled down beside me and pulled me into her arms while she cried.

“Liddy... Look at me please.” My father said. I let go of my mother's shirt and looked into his eyes. His greyish blue eyes looked cloudier than usual, “yes papa....”

He slowly put his arm out, and placed his hand underneath my chin, "I am going to tell you one thing, and one thing only, and I want you to remember this for the rest of your life, do you understand?"

I gulped and nodded at him. He sighed, "I do not know what the future truly holds for you, despite my assumptions of what I believe it does, but promise me one thing."

"Of course papa, what is it?"

"No matter how much control technology has in this world, or this society, never let it consume you, and who you are as a person.. Fight back against it, and always be you. Do you think you can do that? Can you promise me that?"

I smiled weakly, "yes papa, I will never let technology consume me..."

"Good.. I've seen too many good people turn into zombies or technologically obsessed in the last two decades, and I refuse to see my daughter on this beautiful earth do the same. Enjoy what was given to you, not what you wish you had."

"I promise papa, I promise."

I open my eyes and tears flow down my cheeks, "Oh Maislee... I feel like I've failed him."

I cry harder and grab my knees up to my face. My father never wanted me to lose my character, like many others have due to the rise of social media, and the rise of manufacturing and service companies becoming technologically dependent. There is no more one on one people interaction, barely anyways unless you lived in the same household. Even so, people just message their family members.

Maislee scratches at my legs. I let my legs loose and she crawls into my lap and cuddles into me. "How life could've been Maislee. Without them, papa would still be here, mama and papa would be working, and I would be in post-secondary."

She purrs into my chest and I take a deep breath.

"Break is over Ms. Liddy. Your shift ends in t-minus two hours."

I look up at the ramshackle and I nod, "of course.."

I push Maislee gently off of me and get up onto the platform. I look over at the city, and the mountain and sigh, "what life could've been." I turn around and enter into the ramshackle. I sit back down into my chair, place Maislee onto the seat handle, and put my seatbelt on.

"Door close ramshackle." I say.

"Yes Ms.Liddy, the door is now closing."

The door slides closed as I continue to look over at the mountain, wishing there was more snow on it.

"Address Ms. Liddy."

"347 Hazelnut Crescent." I mumble.

"GPS activated, 347 Hazelnut Crescent."

The ramshackle starts moving, and I sigh, knowing that in a year, I will no longer have this job, and this life anymore. My life is becoming what my papa didn't want, technologically dependent.

"I wish nothing ever changed.." I whisper as we move to 347 Hazelnut Crescent.

The End