

My then 82 year old grandson asked me if the world was always like this, if paradise had always existed in this way. If life could be kept in its beautiful slumber forever. That's what made me afraid. Even at 82, he still appeared as he was that day the database filled, a bumbling nine year old tripping over his shoelaces. I didn't want to tell him about the life before; partly because of laws against it, and partly because I didn't want him to grow up. His mom would be heartbroken to see their perfect life ruined by the callous complaints of a person before the time of undeath. So I lied to him, I took him to work, explained what I did. He asked me what I actually did, why I made these drones. I hated that question.

They let me go for free. After all, they were meant to support us, to guide, and to serve our every need. They refused to cross the barrier though. They knew the danger, and they were programmed smarter than to cross it. I wish I was that smart, that I knew more about life than just about Netflix and AES encryption and my office cubicle dimensions. Instead I ventured into the wasteland of eternal life, a desert with each and every resource used up to try and sustain the development our collective waste.

In this desert, every hint of organic life had been recruited to the same eternal servitude of pleasure that us humans had undergone. Lush green fields and fetid dark swamps were all replaced with the useless silica of the rocks and sand below. Its usual apocalyptic nature was filled with a type of grey plainness. It was a different type of nothing, not one filled with the distracting glare of the world coming at ten directions, but a true nothing. It was like the cubicle. There was a beauty in the calm rolling plains of unliving matter, a sureness among it all.

It took a few days before I could find my city. Around it was a halo of collapsed and disassembled pieces of insulation fallen on concrete foundations and basements. All the wood had already been harvested and destroyed to ensure its nonliving state, the only standing

structures that remained among the sand were the brick and mortar post offices and department stores. Within the city, not all of the biomaterial had been stripped away yet. Swarming in the air like a pack of wild bees, drones swept and identified biological matter among the concrete wastes. I wondered if they still had some of the ones that I had signed. I knew it was impossible, because unlike myself, they had preprogrammed self-destruction dates. But I could dream. They had already gotten to my block, and my apartment building, the offices down the block, even the mansions where the wealthy dined their banquets were hollow shells of foundation and skeletal rebar and concrete.

My office was among the southern district of the city, a mess of half decayed biomatter that had not yet been swept by the drones. I recognized it immediately because the same hydra-like apple tree dotted the horizon, this time with branches numbering in the dozens all connected by the same resistant trunk. My shuffles among the broken asphalt turned into steps which turned into a full out sprint towards my target. Even in the darkening twilight, I could distinguish the fruit. Tiny dark blips of scattered red flushed out the thick green foliage among the branches that spun around the tree like veins in a hand. Each apple, too small for human consumption, appeared as a bright red star in a night of leaves and thin branches connected precariously to one of the heads. Close up, you could see the life that used to flourish within the tree, burrows from squirrels long past, a beak sized hole where a woodpecker drilled for lunch, and the same dead bark from where the Mercedes had hit decades past. In its undying state, it was a living manifestation of the past, a biological history of a world that was long gone.

I untied my jacket and took off my stained and torn white T-shirt, exposing my body to the cool night air, and I sat where the homeless man would sit when he could rant no more. I looked around, the rest of my office mirrored the concrete wasteland that surrounded me. But in

that garden plot right outside the front entrance, here was an apple that had fallen off the tree. The most beautiful piece of organic matter I had ever seen. I grasped it with my hand and began to gently examine each detail. There was a hole in one end, the flesh was half torn off, even the stem was polluted with the stench of mold. Even the slightest hint of pressure from my fingers pierced the skin and revealed the rotted nature in between. The worms inside it squirmed gloriously as they continued to gnaw through the apple's flesh, even as I held it. But one worm had escaped it. It had stopped squirming, stopped trying to avoid work, stopped gorging itself on the apparently endless bounty of the tree. Instead, it laid there and like the apple it had gnawed on, began its decay, lifeless. So I bit into the apple too.