

"Select a scientific discovery or technological development from the past 5 years. Now, imagine a single day in the year 2048. How will this breakthrough affect daily life?"

Answer this question via a creative writing piece, up to 1500 words

Virtually Human

It's hard to describe the smell of burning flesh on a battlefield. The putrid, sickening stench lingers in the air; there is no escape. Kneeling on the icy mud, I hear nothing but the steady thumping of my heart, pounding deafeningly through my head. I have to be here- I have to save this life. A soldier lies before me on the wintry ground, crying in agony. Crimson blood seeps out of his abdomen and rolls onto the mud, taking an earthy hue. My stomach churns with nausea.

No, don't lose it now. Remember your training.

Putting pressure on the gunshot wound, I reach for a mud-stained bandage from my medical kit. The blood feels warm and glassy between my fingertips. For a moment, I stare at the thick fluid, mesmerised by its fluent movement. There is an undeniable beauty to blood.

The ear-shattering discharge of gunshots jolts me back into reality. An unforgiving winter breeze whips through my coarse hair, sending a shiver down my spine. Suddenly, an explosion nearby sends a cloud of rubble into the sombre sky. I crouch over my patient, wanting to protect him from the pouring debris.

Focus.

Hastily, I tie the filthy bandage around the soldier's stomach. It's not ideal, but it will have to do. He groans in affliction, begging for pain relief. I fumble helplessly through the medical kit, looking for something, anything, that will help him. I have nothing.

All of a sudden, his agonising yells subdue into silence. I sit frozen, as all signs of life leave the soldier. His chest is unmoving. His olive skin grows pale. I cannot move.

This is a father who will never kiss his children goodnight. A husband who will never dance with his wife. A son who will never see his parents. Now, he is no one but a lifeless body laying limp in my arms.

"Medic! Medic!" A rasping voice cuts through the thick smog.

Startled, I jerk my head towards the sound to see a shadowy figure. For a brief second, his body seems to quiver. Or was it the background that moved? The two blurred together, it was impossible to tell.

Rubbing my eyes, I try to refocus but the corners of my vision start to darken. I hold my hand out but begins to fade from existence.

"Level Four failed," a metallic voice resonates in the grey smoke. *"Simulation ending."*

Everything fades to black.

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I open my eyes to darkness. Reaching cautiously to my clammy face, I peel off the virtual reality headset and lay it on the ground. For a moment, I stay kneeling and rest my head on my trembling hands. The thumping in my brain seems to have got louder.

Breathe.

I can still smell the blood, the sweat, the fear, hanging heavily in the air. I can still hear the desperate, agonising cries of soldiers as they lay in the squelching mud. I can still feel the warm blood against my fingers.

It wasn't real.

"Cameron, what on *earth* was that?," a gruff voice disturbs my thoughts, "You couldn't even save one patient!"

A figure in military uniform appears in the doorway of the dimly lit room, casting a dark shadow over me. I stand to face him but the sturdy body of the sergeant towers over me.

"Sergeant Connor, I'm sorry," I begin, "I panicked. I saw the blood- and- and-"

"And nothing. That was your last chance, and you knew that very well."

"Please, sir." My voice cracks and I feel the pinpricks of tears in my eyes. "I know I have what it takes to be a military doctor. One more simulation, one more chance. I won't let you down."

"Cameron, you know the rules. The fact is, the other candidates are stronger than you," his eyes soften. "You should think about applying for another job."

"Sir, you don't understand. I *have* to be a doctor."

"Why don't you go home now? Get some rest." He leads me into the adjacent waiting room before disappearing behind a black door.

A young girl I don't recognise is sitting tensely on the edge of a chair, her knee bouncing in anticipation. Her long, brown hair is knotted messily into a loose bun and her wide eyes are glued to a textbook on her lap. She is beautiful without trying. As she turns the page, I catch sight of her fingernails, bitten red raw from anxiety.

Her bright blue eyes glance up and lock with mine. I look away, realising I've been staring.

"Hi, I'm Gabriela," she begins, folding the book and getting up to shake my hand. "But most people call me Gabby."

"I'm- I'm Cameron." My voice is shaky and it doesn't sound like it's mine. I clear my throat.

What's wrong with me? I see one pretty girl and I can barely talk.

"So, did you just have a simulation?"

"Yeah, Level 4," I say slowly, the haunting image of the dying soldier seared in my mind. "It was rough."

She looks at me, taking in my bloodshot eyes and trembling hands. Her eager expression changes.

"It was that bad?"

I nod.

“You know, there was a time a few decades ago when virtual reality was only used for games,” she continues. “Imagine that; now they use it for everything- even this torture they call training.”

I smile briefly. “My dad told me about that. He had one of the first ever mass-produced headsets. They were so fascinated by the idea of complete immersion. I guess gaming was the obvious use for it.” I shudder, remembering the stench and noise in the simulation, “Who would’ve thought stereoscopic display would become so realistic so quickly?”

“That’s what you get when cooperate greed meets early twenty-first century science,” Gabby retorts. She looks more at ease now. As I open my mouth to reply, a loudspeaker announcement interrupts.

“Miss King to VR room two.”

“That’ll be me. Wish me luck.” she takes a deep breath and steps into the shadowy room I was just in. I watch her slender figure disappear into the darkness, as the door slides shut.

Good luck.

Turning to the exit to begin the routine journey home, I reach for my breathing mask by the door where I left it. Pollution made the atmosphere almost unbreathable a decade or so ago; using these masks is the only way to safely walk outside. I turn the collar of my jacket up against the icy wind. The streets are alive with the bustle of humanity, yet no one makes eye contact. No one smiles. I glance up into the bleak, overcast sky. When was the last time it was blue? Barren wasteland lays where the park once was, piled high with plastic rubbish that will not decompose for hundreds of years.

Austerity lurks at every corner of the City. There is no way to ignore it. Everyday, children work relentlessly, slaves to a life of hunger and destitution that they cannot escape from. I see their hollowed cheeks, their tired eyes, their cracked lips, and yearn in desperation to help each and every one of them; but humanity has come full circle and poverty is their perpetual master.

I reach my flat and press my hand to the rusty scanner. The heavy door groans open as a cloud of dust erupts from the doorway and settles again.

I sigh, and reach into the fridge for a strong drink, the movements rehearsed and fluent. Collapsing onto the worn, shabby sofa I take a sip. As soon as the alcohol hits my blood, I begin to relax. This has become a daily routine.

Apart from the constant police siren whining from a distance, there is absolute silence.

After a while, I wander cautiously across the creaky floorboards into the dingy little box room. In the middle of the floor lies a virtual reality headset. Its welcoming green lights blink happily, as if to greet me.

I place it on my head.



“Daddy!” The unmistakable joyful cry of a child fills the air.

I open my eyes to a sapphire sky. The comforting warmth of the summer sun beats on my skin. I squint my eyes to see a little girl, perhaps 3 years old, racing towards me. I crouch to hug her, taking in the sweet smell of chocolate milkshake that she must just have had. Her blonde ringlets and perfectly soft skin look so real. I smile.

“Hey Rosie!” I exclaim. “How’s my little girl?”

“Let’s go on the swings, Daddy!” She grabs my hand and pull me across the emerald green grass to a set of swings, where a beautiful woman is waiting. As we approach, I jolt in recognition of her bright blue eyes and long brown hair.

Gabby.

“Mummy’s been waiting for you, Daddy!”

I reach to envelope them both in a hug; tears of happiness prickle my eyes.

“Daddy’s here, darling.” I whisper. “And I’m never going.”