

RCSU Science Challenge

Dr Felicia Yap's question

'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

Breakthrough: Memory manipulation 1457 words

Blake stared at the small, circular disks. In a few moments, they would be glued to his head, and his memory would be wiped. He would become a baby in a grown man's body, blank and helpless. He shuddered. He knew he deserved it. All the other criminals had suffered the punishment. He knew, because he saw them every day, crouched on the sidewalks, or sitting at a café, faces blank and confused as if wondering how they got there. He knew he deserved it - even in his own opinion the things he had done were horrific. Still, he didn't want to become one of *them*.

They were the dirty secrets of New Earth, the 'new world' that was supposed to be better, fairer, and safer. The 'new world' wasn't without its secrets though: its quiet mutterings and covert glances. *They* were just one of the worse ones. *They* were the ones that nobody talked about, at least not in public. Nobody asked about them, and if they did, it would be in dark rooms and secret gatherings, quiet murmurs amongst the flitting shadows. You just didn't talk about them.

The lack of talk didn't mean that they were forgotten though. Everybody knew them: who they were, what they looked like and where they usually stood about, staring blankly. Everybody saw them: their empty, dead eyes, their tatty clothes, their ghost-like skin. But you didn't mention them, and you certainly didn't acknowledge them. You just sidestepped them in the streets, avoided their cold and unseeing eyes, and shied away from their spidery fingers that crept towards you if you got too close.

He remembered the first time he had encountered one of *them*; he was seven years old at the time. He remembered the feel of his mother's vice-like grip on his upper arm, the feel of her nails digging in his arm as she dragged him away, away from *her*. He remembered how they had ended up in a petite charity store decked in pretty pastel blues, and how she had cupped his face in her rough hands and kissed his brow. He remembered how she told him that she loved him dearly and she would never let him get close to one of them ever again, and that she would kill them if they approached him ever again; she swore it on her life.

She was dead now.

He killed her. He killed his father and brother too. If it were any consolation, they would not suffer from her parting, but he absently wondered how she would feel about him, shuffling uncomfortably in a plasticky chair, about to become one of *them*. He wondered if she would yell at him, perhaps even slap him if she knew. Perhaps she would say she didn't know him. To be fair, he didn't really know who he was himself, not anymore. He laughed, a hollow sound coming out of his mouth. Perhaps she was crying and rolling around in her grave, grieving at who he had become - what he

would become. He didn't really know. He didn't really care, either. He was never that good with empathy and the like anyway.

He turned his head to the wall.

There was a small, square window. It was roughly a metre from the ceiling, and had a bit of mould on the edges of it. The glass was a bit dusty and foggy and not much could be seen through it, given the dirt and his distance, but he could just about make out the blue of the sky. He assumed that the reddish blobs were other parts of the building he was in. He tried to crane his head for a better look, but was then rather forcefully reminded that he was strapped back and was about to be killed. Well, at least mentally.

The executioner took a disk and peeled off the adhesive backing. It was placed on his forehead. It was a bit sticky, but felt pleasantly cool and rather refreshing, like cucumber slices on the eyes. Three more disks were placed in rapid succession, and not once during the whole procedure did the executioner look at him. The executioner's hands were slightly trembling. There was a slight fumbling with the application when the third disk was placed. Ah, he thought. A small smirk graced his face. He's going to have a difficult time sleeping tonight.

Blake closed his eyes and inhaled. What would he feel, when he was wiped of his mind? What would he think of the way others regarded him? Would he be able *to* think? He thought back to his early teenage years, when everything was, well, not fine, exactly, but normal. Predictable. Not chaotic like the world he was in now. Wake up at seven. Brush teeth, put on uniform and walk to school. Avoid the main road, because *she* was usually there, and take the side path instead. If he arrived early, buy a croissant from the canteen for breakfast. If he was late, run to registration and buy a croissant at recess instead. On the way home, take the side road because *she* liked to lurk by the main road in the afternoon, take the bus 3 stops, and walk the remaining two minutes. Unless it was a Thursday. He had hockey on Thursdays, and his mum would pick him up because it finished late. The memories were there, albeit a little hazy.

He remembered how he would wake up in the dead of night because of a knocking sound at least twice a month. He remembered how his mother also woke, and grabbing a lamp and an umbrella, strode down the stairs to the front door. He remembered how she would push her shoulders back, stand up straight, (a tactic to make yourself seem bigger, more threatening to your enemies) and cautiously open the door, only a little though, so she could peek through the gap and prepare herself against whoever, or more accurately, whatever, was there. He remembered how she would slam the door shut and tell him in a trembling voice (but well hidden, you mustn't let others know you are scared, because that is a weakness and if they find a weakness they will exploit it; they will pry you open like a mussel) to go to his room and stay there and don't come out, for pity's sake!

He never did go to his room. On the contrary, he preferred to crouch on the stairs and watch his mother jab at the thing that was lurking on the front step, yell at them to leave and never come back! They never reacted to her screaming, their faces remained placid and portrayed no change in emotion. They just stared back blankly, and they would stay at the front step, unmoving. It was only when his mother shoved them back with the lamp or umbrella that they moved back, seemingly unaware that they had been potentially injured. He had once seen his mother jab so furiously at one that it bled. It seemed not to realise that it was bleeding rather profusely. Would he become like them? Unaware of even his own body?

He opened his eyes. The executioner sat in front of him, calm, poised. The façade was good, but he knew the executioner was trembling. It was all too obvious by the way he clasped his hands a little too tightly.

The executioner stood up, and walked over to the surprisingly small machine that would erase his mind. A switch was flicked, and the machine whirred to life with a low, steady hum.

'Do you have any last words?' asked the executioner.

Blake merely smiled, and shook his head.

A button was pressed. He closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes, and met the gaze of the executioner, who was now undoing the straps that bound him to the chair. He felt a hand placed at the small of his back. He was being pushed forward, being coaxed to move. He did.

He found himself outside, surrounded by unfamiliar walls and unfamiliar trees and unfamiliar people that stared at him funny. He turned, but the executioner was long gone. He made his way to a bench and sat down. There was a woman sitting on the bench next to him. Immediately, the woman got up and left, taking her two children with her. He watched her leave, watched the children turn back and stare at him curiously, watched their heads firmly twisted back round by their mother. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He inhaled. He opened his eyes. A wide smirk stretched his lips.

The punishment hadn't worked. He still remembered.