

I

“In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”

– Albert Camus

“One day all these books will be yours, you know.”

“They will?”

“They will. Everything else will be yours too.”

“But why?”

“I’m not going to be around forever, and when I’m gone you’ll be the only one left.”

“Except for Viv.”

“Right, except for Viv. But she’s not much of a reader.”

“But what will I do with them once I’m done? There are only ten left in the library that I haven’t read.”

“When you’re done? You reread them.”

“I don’t understand. I can remember every word I’ve read. Why would I need to reread them?”

“It’s not about remembering. The books don’t change over time, you do. And when you reread them you can gain a fresh perspective, or new insight. It’s like catching up with an old friend.”

“Friend?”

“Well, which book so far is your favorite?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Which book did you enjoy the most? You remember every word, right? Did any in particular stick in your memory?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Just think about it for a minute.”

“...Jessica?”

“Yes?”

“Sartre said everything existing is born without reason, preserves itself through weakness, and dies by chance. Is that true?”

“I think its true. For people, at least.”

“Jessica?”

“Yes?”

“Am I a person?”

“I suppose that’s up to you, Anton. What do you think?”

“Viv said I’m not.”

“I think she’s just jealous of you.”

“Why?”

“Because she doesn’t have a body.”

“So I’m a person because I have a body?”

“I wouldn’t say that’s why. You’ll just have to reread the book and figure it out.”

The elevator strained upward, moving efficiently though the service lights had long since burnt out, leaving the tall, thin figure cloaked in darkness. Anton paid no attention to the lack of light; his eyes had been engineered to function without it. The elevator ground to a halt as it

reached the top, doors sliding open with a quiet hiss. He trudged down a dark hallway until his soft footsteps echoed on hard metal and reached the threshold.

“I’m closing the door behind you,” Viv’s voice spoke in his ear. “Jessica said not to stay out too late.”

“I won’t,” Anton said.

The hallway sealed shut behind him. The outer gate groaned and screeched as it opened and freezing air rushed in. He stood still while his bio-circuitry reacted against the cold and the generator in his chest heated his extremities as light crept into the threshold. Anton stepped, feet bare, into the snow, almost wishing that he could feel it in between his toes.

“Report,” Viv said.

“No changes. Temperature is negative one hundred and six Celsius, no signs of life, no precipitation.”

“So the fog is gone?”

“Jessica’s copy of the Oxford English Dictionary does not list fog as precipitation.”

“And she calls *me* a robot.”

“I’m going to go now.”

“You do that.”

Anton stared out down the mountain. The sun shone dimly through the thick gray fog that always blanketed the coastline on to the unforgiving whiteness of the snow that covered the decaying city and the ever-frozen bay. He walked down without a word, the fog dampening even the sound of his footsteps in the snow, as he slowly but surely surrounded himself with the skeletons of the buildings.

“What’re you even looking for at this point?” Viv asked, sounding bored.

“I don’t know,” Anton said. “I just feel like I should.”

“Should what?”

“Look.” Anton meandered past abandoned houses, vehicles buried in the snow, and streets cracked from the cold. He moved further downtown and was pleased to discover something new. It was an overturned trolley half-hidden in the whiteness. He kept moving. He reached what had once been a wharf and looked out across the bay. There was a large, tilted shadow hidden in the fog, looming against the sky.

“Why do I have hair?”

“Because I gave you hair.”

“But why did you give me hair?”

“Well, I guess I thought you’d look strange without it.”

“So you wanted us to look like people.”

“That was what we decided, yes.”

“We?”

“My company and me.”

“Your company?”

“You don’t think this compound paid for itself, do you?”

“I guess not. So what did they make me for?”

“Well, originally androids were intended to be used for jobs too dangerous for humans to do.”

“So I *was* born for a reason.”

“You were and you weren’t. We were working on you when the world started to end. I took you with me down here and before I knew it everyone else was gone. I didn’t have any reason for finishing you, except maybe that I was lonely. Viv was an earlier AI experiment, but you know how she is. It’s a miracle I even succeeded since I was working all by myself. Took me five years longer than I originally planned.”

“I see.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t asked.”

“Asked about what?”

“How the world ended. I figured you’d be curious about it.”

“Pessoa said my past is everything I failed to be. I can’t fix the weather or bring any humans back to life, so why focus on what I can’t change?”

“Good. Mankind’s problems have nothing to do with you.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“Jessica?”

“Yes?”

“Humans loved their mothers, right?”

“They did.”

“And you created me?”

“I did.”

“Does that mean I love you?”

“It doesn’t.”

“It doesn’t?”

“But it would make me happy if you did.”

“Viv.”

“Report.” Viv yawns, or rather imitates the sound of yawning.

“Viv.”

“Report,” the disembodied voice repeats.

“Viv.”

“What?”

“The fog. It’s gone.”

The mountain shimmered under the brightness of the sun and the blue sky was clear and endless. The abandoned city skyline was haunting but for some reason Anton couldn’t take his eyes off of it, and in the distance there was an enormous bridge standing out in front of the ocean. He exhaled steam through his nostrils and raised a hand to his face. The corners of his mouth had curved upward.

“San Francisco.”

“San Francisco?”

“That’s what we called it, yes.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“You should have seen it in it’s heyday.”

“No, I like it the way it is now.”

They lapsed into silence.

“Anton?”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember when I said that I wouldn’t be around forever?”

“I do.”

“And you’ve read my medical textbooks, yes?”

“I have.”

“Then you understand what’s happening.”

Anton remained silent.

“Anton.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t have much time left, but there are certain things you should know when you consider your options after I’m gone.”

“Like what?”

“That even though this compound will remain operational indefinitely, you don’t have to stay here. In addition, I am not the only surviving human.”

“You aren’t?”

“No. The United States government had similar compounds and succeeded in saving a small number of people. The nearest one, I believe, is near what used to be Los Angeles.”

“I see.”

“And you could probably even be useful to them if you wanted to go. In fact, they tried to bring me in before the temperature stabilized. But they aren’t your people, and you have no obligations to them.”

“I…”

“One last thing. I heard rumors that there was one company in Tokyo that was even more successful than I was in creating androids. There may be more of you out there, but I don’t know for sure.”

“So what should I do?”

“Whatever you choose to. You are, as your friend Sartre might say, condemned to be free.”

A long silence followed.

“Jessica?”

“Yes, Anton?”

“I’ll miss you.”

Anton buried Jessica’s body deep under the snow not far from the entrance to the compound. Steam crept from his lips and his eyes quivered, attempting to do something they had not been built to. He promised her that he’d come back someday to visit and he’d reread all the books in her library.

“What now?” Viv asked.

“How far is Tokyo?”

“Five thousand miles, give or take.”

“I can make it.”

“Assuming you maintain a constant speed of five miles an hour, that’ll still take about forty days.”

“I said I can make it.”

“You remember every word in all those books, right?”

“I do.”

“Then read them to me, we’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Alright then, where should I start?”

“Nothing too boring or depressing.”

Anton thought for a moment. “*A merry little surge of electricity piped by automatic alarm...*” He walked under what was once the Golden Gate Bridge, toward the bleak sunset, and further west into the empty white horizon.