

The walls were speaking to her as she woke up. They told her that today was Sunday the 16th of June, it was 8:47 AM, and she, Mika, really ought to be getting out of bed. The year was 2120, and thanks to the latest smart-home software update, walls could now talk. She sighed, rolled out of bed, and began navigating her way down the stairs adorned with cardboard boxes full of things that were now like, totally vintage, but had always held a certain fascination for her: actual ink pens and paper, touch screen smart phones and real hard back books. She could not fathom why her father was so insistent on having the latest version of the i-home, even though it meant that the entire loft space was now occupied with 'the cloud' and the house was running out of storage at an alarming rate. They would soon have to delete more of their old possessions, much to the discontent of her 116-year-old great grandmother, who had dedicated her last twenty years to secretly recovering them from 'recently deleted' and sneaking them back into her bedroom.

"Morning Mum, Granny," she said, striding through the hallway and into the kitchen where her 2-year-old brother, James, sat at the table, solving algebraic equations. Early years education had advanced quite a bit.

"Going out early again, Love?" queried her mother, eyes unwavering from the computer screen in front of her as her daughter laced up her battered and beloved trainers that were really starting to pinch her toes.

"Yes, Mum," she replied, now gulping down a mug of tea from the kitchen table because despite everything, the English had not forgotten their love of tea, as her great grandma so

loved to remind her. “I like the morning air. That’s when it feels freshest.”

She stood in the hallway, facing the door that scanned and recognised her face with a ‘bleep’, sliding aside almost instantly to reveal the outside world of grey. In the morning air, there hung a musty feeling of fog, a warm breath that clung like an unwelcome hug as a result of global pollution. A crisp packet caught her attention, audibly scraping and cartwheeling its way across the colourless pavement in the futile breeze. The bin, which sat on the street corner, rose noiselessly to reveal two stubby silver legs, produced two mechanical arms and proceeded to waddle over to the empty packet. After a short chase, in which the robotic bin almost toppled over head first, it bent down to the ground, opened its mouth, and ate the crisp packet with a great crunch. Mika walked past as it sped back to sit in its original position on the street corner, seemingly lifeless.

She was desperate to feel something. Things were far too ordered, too grey and digitalised and perfect and life was exhaustingly simple. She found herself at the local appointed square of ‘green space’ and lay down in the neatly trimmed grass. An endless stream of ants marched past her shoulder, ordered and unchanging from their designated path as the white sun grimaced down upon them all, imperfect Mika and the perfect society of ants. She wondered if they ever got bored of living in that way, life so structured and unvaried. As the sun retreated behind the clouds, defeated by the inevitable atmosphere of grey and soullessness, a light rain began to fall and she lay for a while, raindrops chasing each other over her arms and legs and face, like tears she wished she could cry. Eventually though, it was her old trainers that were to sabotage her teen-girl-lying-in-the-rain

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moment, as the water soaked through to her toes, and she subsequently squelched her way home.

As she began the precarious ascent up the disorderly stairs, the walls let out a booming voice “Mika. I have taken James to the Settings centre to order some more storage for the house. Dad is at work and Granny is in her room. Be back soon” followed by a disturbingly passive and emotionless “Message from Mum to Mika at 10:33AM”.

The volume of the house must have been broken; the blaring voice of the walls had startled Mika so that her sodden sock slipped and she lost her footing on the steps. In the resulting tumble, a box marked ‘GRANNY’S REALLY OLD THINGS’ had been upturned, and the contents lay in a pile at the foot of the stairs. She began to throw the foreign objects back into the box one by one- a pair of headphones used before you could stream music directly to your brain; a shopping bag from when people went into real life shops; a little book of stamps from when people actually posted letters. What stole Mika’s attention, though, was a square piece of paper, folded as many times as possible, marked ‘a poem of love’. The idea of writing with real life paper and pen had always amazed her. She unfolded the square eagerly and smoothed it out with her fingers, careful not to damage the fading ink. It read:

‘I think it is possible

To remember a ‘before’

But never to imagine an ‘after’

A future where you are absent would not be mine

You are my end’

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Mika pulled off her wet socks hastily and crashed up the stairs (successfully this time). She threw open the door to her grandmother's bedroom, panting breathlessly, clutching this thing on the page.

"Granny." she gasped, waving the paper in her face. "What is this? What do you call this? When did people feel-"

"That my dear, is poetry", interrupted her great grandmother with a tired smile that said 'at last'.

She had never really seen her grandmother before. Of course, she had 'seen' her, sitting in her chair, stagnant in the corner unless she was called, much like the bin on the street, Mika had thought. The most interesting thing about her had been that she should have died twenty years earlier when her heart failed, but due to the new 3D stem cell printing technology, a robotic surgeon had replaced it with one that would never falter. Average life expectancy was up to 130 years now, after all. But she had never really, really seen her, looked deep into the wrinkles of her tanned skin, beyond the drooping blue eyes, beads of ocean unexplored. It was a face that had felt, once upon a time, all of the truest feelings that Mika was so desperate for.

And so, Mika asked how these short words ordered in this way could compose something so beautiful, and asked what had happened and asked why no one did such a thing anymore. And her great grandmother, at 116 years of age, told her the story of a very long time ago, over 100 years ago, where there had been a world abundant with love and

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laughter and emotion and feeling, which people formed into art called poetry.

And one day, when she had been 16 years old, a deadly disease swept throughout the globe and stole everything that had once been. People were forced to plug in; the entire world migrated online where everyone was so connected, yet so disconnected. The digital revolution began, convenient and distanced and it had felt so safe at first, to do things like this, always six feet apart, always masked, in real life or behind screens. But even when the disease couldn't steal the lives of the people who were confined to their homes, it stole life. And all this time, the feeling and inspiration for this art called poetry dwindled and dwindled. Everything came to be scientific and digital; a world of colour and life was purged into black and white and right and wrong and slowly, silently, the barrier between virtual and real life had melted away like rich chocolate on a hot summer's day.

Suddenly, as quickly as this disease had arrived, it decided to leave. But it left behind the broken things, a generation of children that did not know how to hug and kiss people hello and goodbye, and adults who could not stop washing their hands after every embrace, because it was safer, because that was what the science had said, and teenagers who were suddenly grown-ups in this new and foreign digital world. In this age of digitalisation and disconnection, the value of the humanities and literature and art and poetry had been lost. The value of feeling and touching and loving had been lost. What had not been lost, in the aftermath of this disease, was the distance that it had forced between everyone. So the people, like Mika's great grandmother, who had loved to write and feel, the people who had created poetry, the beauty of the intertwining words, not quite story and

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not quite song, were forgotten. Not only was their work no longer valued, but there was no longer any soul or feeling or inspiration left in the world, for them to continue creating.

How Mika's great grandmother had loved to read and write poetry, how she felt the art and inspiration drained from the world. How she wished most of all that someone would have warned them that the greatest and most terrible impact of all would be the after, or rather, that there would never be an after, for the world of art and literature and love and poetry, would never recover if they didn't try to save it.

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