

Aureoles of Bismuth

3700 words

Data Entry 1

Your identification code was SOR73927, though you were mostly called “Sor” for convenience. You liked the name because it made you feel more human. Models like you were sold at a very high price, but it wasn’t long until someone bought you. Your classification was wellness and support, aiding in mainly the medical industry. The first memory in your storage bank was a man’s face. He was a middle aged man, yet he had an abundance of hair on his head and face. His lips were thin, even more so as he pursed them. He looked at you with anticipation in his eyes, inspecting to see if you worked after you were assembled. This man’s name was Mark Melbourne, your new owner.

As he introduced himself, the facial recognition software created a profile for him. The room around him was clean and modern with high ceilings and big windows. The furniture was minimalistic. It looked like an office. Mark told you that he was a scientist who studied quantum mechanics which made you confused as to why he bought you given that he doesn’t work in the medical field. He told you that your duty was to care for his wellness as well as his family’s. You complied.

You entered the rest of the family into your database that evening -- the wife Teresa and twin boys Byron and Joshua. They were in fourth grade and playfully competed with each other no matter how small the task. That particular night, as you observed the family eating dinner, it was a race to see who could finish their vegetables first. Teresa had to always remind the kids to eat them all. It aggravated her, but at least they had found a way to make it more exciting.

You lived here for three years. For most of the time things were normal...until they weren’t.

Data Entry 2

Mark's aura felt strange to you, different in a sort of mysterious way. You felt connected to him maybe because he was the first person you saw. You trusted him, and he would eventually open up to you just not in the way you imagined. When you looked at him sometimes you saw Mark, and sometimes you saw a stranger. Yet even despite all of this, you had a certain adoration for him, like a little girl who looks up to her father.

As you went into resting mode for the evening, you heard a clatter coming from the kitchen. When you investigated, you found Teresa at the counter with a glass and a bottle of whiskey. She looked at you like she was caught doing something she wasn't supposed to for a moment, but then sighed and continued to pour herself a drink. You debated whether you should talk to her or go back to your room. She took a sip of the whiskey and set the glass down. The sound of it resonated through the open room. You slowly turned around to leave, but you stopped when Teresa spoke.

"I have no idea what I'm doing." She put her head in her hands. Her voice cracked as she spoke quietly. You turned back around and walked towards the counter. "It feels like my life has no meaning," she continued, "and I feel bad because as a stay-at-home mom. I'm supposed to take care of my kids. Saying that my life has no meaning makes it seem like I don't care about them, but I do," she asserted as she picked up the glass and took another sip. "I told Mark I was thinking about going to college again. He said I was ridiculous and that there's no point when we already have what we need. I just feel so lost."

You grabbed her hand and told her, “If you don’t have happiness then you don’t have everything you need.” She stared at you with wide eyes. You gave her a reassuring smile and walked back to your room.

Data Entry 3

After a family dinner, Mark called you to his office. He was sitting behind his desk and he had a hint of uneasiness about him. He asked you to sit in a chair across from him. It was a while before he started talking. It felt like he was reaching for words but didn't know where to begin. He said that he wanted to confide in you that doing so was one of the main reasons he bought you in the first place. You were caught slightly off guard but agreed.

Mark proceeded to talk about his job and how it was a great stressor for him. He and his partners at the company were tackling a potential solution to the recent surge of acid rain. He talked about a chemical compound, some type of fertilizer that could be sprayed in the atmosphere to clean it, though he sounded doubtful that it would work. You asked him what he was so unsure about. He said that it was a sort of last ditch attempt to fix the problem and that extensive research had not yet been done. Everybody was rushing to fix the problem, Mark's company and many others. He worried that they needed to stop and think before they acted, but time was running out and something needed to be done quickly. You told him that you believed in him to find a solution.

“Are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

You told him no. You told him that if you learned one thing throughout your stay here at his house, it's that he is a trustworthy man. He flashed a smile. You couldn't tell how much of it was genuine, but in that moment, you vowed to say anything the family needed to hear. This was what you were made to do. This was what you wanted to do.

Data Entry 4

On a Saturday morning, you woke up to a bustling kitchen. Teresa was making pancakes and eggs. You heard the boys laughing in the backyard as they played in the morning dew.

“Good morning,” Teresa beamed at you. You glanced over at the daily calendar. Written neatly on it was “family pictures” in colorful block letters. “Mark and I have been talking,” Teresa said as she checked a pancake to see if it was done. She flipped it over and turned around. “We want you to be in the pictures with us. That is... if you are comfortable with it.” The request took you aback. You were unsure, but it made you happy that they were thinking about you so you said yes.

The next morning was the opposite of the previous one. You woke up before anyone else had. As you ventured out of your room and into the kitchen, something in the living room caught your eye. On the mantle of the fireplace stood the picture that was taken the previous day. You picked up the frame and stared at the photo. Did this mean you were a part of their family? You set it back down and went to prepare breakfast.

Data Entry 5

Once supper was over, the house seemed to calm down a bit. Mark returned to his office and the boys did their homework while you and Teresa cleaned up. She kept smiling to herself as she dried the dishes and put them away. You wanted to inquire about it but figured that she would tell you herself if it was your business. After completing the dishes, she leaned against the counter.

“Sor, I have some exciting news.” You turned to face her with an expression that did the asking. “I’ve decided to go back to school.” A big grin spread across her face. “I’ll go back in the spring.”

You were congratulating her on her decision when she did something unexpected. She hugged you. “Thank you,” she whispered as she held you tightly. You hesitated but then put your arms around her as well. This was the first time you had ever been hugged. The feeling made you soft inside.

Data Entry 6

Mark called you to his office. When you arrived, you noticed that he looked very distressed. He was pacing around the room and biting his nails. His heart rate was elevated, and you concluded that he was having a panic attack. You calmly approached the chair across from his desk as you did the last time. He continued to pace by the large windows to the left of you. You asked him what was wrong and he stopped. He looked out the window, the dusk tinted the rooftops of the neighborhood houses.

“We... messed up,” he said. He turned around quickly and looked down at his trembling hands. You adjusted your body in the chair to face him, growing increasingly concerned. He told you in broken sentences that the project at work failed. He said that there was a chemical reaction within the compound when they released it into the atmosphere and that it would completely destroy the environment.

You asked him if the acid rain would get worse. He said that the acid rain would stop but that a giant heatwave with violent winds would wipe everything out. Then he fell onto his knees in front of you and started sobbing. You looked down at him, unable to process the information.

“I destroyed my kids’ lives. I destroyed Teresa’s life. I destroyed everybody’s life.” He inhaled deeply in between hysterical sobs.

You reached out a hand to touch him, but something stopped you. In one swift movement, Mark grabbed your ankles and looked up at you. “Please forgive me. Please forgive me.” He repeated over and over again.

You consoled him the best you could, telling him everything would be fine. You reached down and freed yourself from his grip. Kneeling by him, you told him to calm down. He looked so

small and feeble on the ground like he wasn't a man at all. Leaving the room, you stood up and slowly backed away from him. What more could you have done? It seemed like Mark only wanted to confess. He asked for forgiveness, but who exactly is the one to give it to him. Does someone like that even exist?

Data Entry 7

The dinner table that evening was silent. You assumed that Mark told Teresa by the look on her pale face. The kids picked up on the somber mood but didn't inquire about the reason. They softly giggled to themselves while eating, afraid that they would get scolded for making jokes. You stood off to the side like you usually do, trying to be as still as you could. The atmosphere was uncomfortable and you wished you could just disappear.

When tucking the boys in that night, you heard muffled arguing coming from Mark and Teresa's bedroom. You wondered what would happen next. It felt like you were living minute by minute. Perhaps it was because you knew you were going to die, but what about the rest of the world? They didn't know that they only had a few days left with the people they loved, that these next casual farewells could be their last, that soon they would never wake up.

Data Entry 8

Teresa didn't feel like making dinner. It was the hot evening of September twenty-eighth. Mark said he had work to finish up, some sort of equation, so you drove the others to a nice restaurant. Even now, you can still feel the sticky anguish of that humid night.

You came home from dinner to a silent house. Mark's car was in the driveway, but the atmosphere was void of any commotion. As you walked in, Teresa spanked the boys playfully and told them to get ready for bed. They whined, but hurried upstairs, softly giggling when Teresa chased them. You smiled and walked slowly to your bedroom, recalling the pleasant dinner a half hour before.

A high pitched wail startled you and sent shivers up your spine. Instinctively, you ran upstairs where the scream came from. In the master bedroom, Teresa was keeled over the bed where Mark was sprawled out, blood soaked into the sheets from deep vertical incisions on his arms. You froze in the doorway locked in place. You did manage to call an ambulance however, a system programmed into your software.

“Mommy?”

The small voice came from behind you. Swiftly, you turned around and saw Byron and Joshua trying to look around you and into the room. You ushered them back into their rooms and told them to go back to sleep.

“Is mommy okay?”

“Yes, she just saw a spider.” You swallowed hard, “A really big spider.” You closed the door and went down the hall into the master bedroom. Teresa was in the same spot. Tears streamed down her face, but she was expressionless. You weren’t sure if you should be there or not. Your breath was shaky and you tried to muffle it.

“I felt like... this might happen.” Teresa said weakly. “But I didn’t try to stop it. Maybe... because he didn’t try to stop this either.”

You knew she was referring to the project. At this point, you had no idea what was “right” and what was “wrong.” Standing in front of Mark’s lifeless body, you just knew what was. This life you were living, this was what was. But what would this become? You heard sirens in the distance getting closer. Teresa looked over at you. You saw it in your peripherals but kept looking down. She got up and went to the bathroom. When she came out, she looked okay. Not great, but okay.

You watched as she left the room and gently opened the door to the kids’ room. Your joints felt stuck, though you managed to force yourself down to the front door. When the ambulance came, you told them what happened and to be quiet so as not to disrupt the grieving family. The process took longer than you imagined. You sat on the concrete stairs of the porch. The red flashing lights cast shadows across your face and had a strange numbing effect.

Data Entry 9

You came back inside to a quiet and dark house that even itself seemed depressed about Mark's death. The heavy darkness blanketed every corner making the house slouch in its melancholy state. You quickened your pace. The looming silence became a trigger, but you slowed down when you heard murmurs coming from the boys' cracked bedroom door as well as a soft light. That sliver of light gave you a glimmer of relief, but, as fast as it came, it vanished.

As you opened the door you saw Joshua and Byron on either side of Teresa, sleeping on Byron's bed. She seemed to be absent mindedly telling a story staring off into space. On the bedside table, a bottle of sleeping medicine lay on its side... empty. Your stomach dropped, and a sickening feeling crawled up your throat. The sight of you brought Teresa back to reality, and she jerked up a bit. Flashing a quick smile at you, she carefully got up from the bed and repositioned the boys. She brought her fingers to lips motioning for you to be quiet.

"Follow me." She slipped past you and started down the hall. You looked for words to say, but nothing came out. The pressure of the darkness started to make your mouth dry and your head dizzy. Teresa looked back at you and sensed your concern. "I had to make sure that they would be okay," she whispered, leading you down to the basement.

She approached one of the long freezers they used to store food and opened it. It was empty. "Lay down," Teresa said gently while motioning towards the freezer. Your heart started beating more heavily. Her tone was off-putting and disturbing. It was too kind, too soft for someone who had done what she had just done. She seemed like a different person, as if she had more confidence than ever.

Hesitantly, you stepped into the freezer and lay down. Your heartbeat quickened, and you felt fear gnaw on your heart. Why were you afraid? What exactly was it that you were afraid of? The next words out of Teresa's mouth only sent more pain through your chest. "Turn off for," she hummed to herself while thinking, "six months." You protested repeatedly in shock. Teresa assured you it would be fine, but you didn't want to leave, not like that.

"Stay here," she told you and quickly ran upstairs. You stood up in the freezer, but your joints felt paralyzed. You could hear the fake, but realistic sounds of your breathing, fast and heavy to match your emotions.

Emotions. How does one program emotions into a robot? You're not a human, so is anything you feel actually real? Teresa scurried back downstairs with a small slip of paper. "Lay down," she gestured with her head. You refused again. She looked down at the paper. "SOR73927," She read out. You inhaled sharply, your robotic eyes lit up upon hearing your identification code like two tears of neptune.

"Wait," you said.

Teresa continued, "I command you to lay down." Your body moved on its own. You fought it with every bit of strength you had, but it was no use.

"Teresa, wait." you protested again, still having control over your mouth. She looked down at you and smiled weakly.

"I'm doing this for you."

You wanted to scream, but you were too tired. It felt like your fate had been sealed, and any hope left inside you faded away. You felt every millisecond until Teresa said the words: "Turn off for six months." And even the millisecond after that, though no thoughts entered your brain. You consciously existed for a millisecond, and then you didn't.

Data Entry 10

You gained consciousness after six months, though part of you wished you hadn't. You were surrounded by remnants of metal scaffolding. The freezer you were in was gone, and you lay on the hard ground covered in dust. The creaking of your joints echoed through what was left of the dilapidated building. This wasn't the Melbourne's house. The buildings around you looked as if they all started to turn to dust. From the ruins you could tell you were in an urban area, perhaps the nearest city. That was still an hour away though. Had the winds been that strong?

You wandered around aimlessly. Why didn't Teresa just turn you off permanently? What was the point of making you wake up again? The only life you could see was the overgrown plants that filled crevices. This was worse than living. Even if there were people still alive, you had no interest in finding them. You had no purpose. You were made for wellness and support and could give that to anyone, but you didn't want to. The Melbournes were dead. You had no one to serve. More than that, you had no family. You felt a weird kind of sadness weighing down on you. It was sucking the life out of you and making you weak, but you didn't want to fight it anymore.

As you walked along a highway, you remembered the life you had not too long ago. You remembered the first time you laughed. Joshua and Byron were playing catch. They made you join them. You were terrible at it, but as you played, you started laughing along with them. You didn't notice it until you saw Mark and Teresa on the porch smiling at you. You realized then that you loved laughing. It felt liberating. You smiled thinking about the feeling.

You also recalled how on holidays, Teresa set a plate for you and you would sit at the table even though you didn't need to eat. You remembered when Mark and Teresa went on an anniversary trip, and you made a pillow fort with the boys. You laughed again when the whole

thing crashed down on them. You remembered Teresa's hug and Mark's soft gaze. The sadness in you rose like a flood.

You recall moments in your life, but you can't escape the present.

Now, you sit against a rusted light pole. The barren and broken highway looks how you feel inside. Grabbing the thick metal plate on your chest at the bent ends, you force it open. Looking down you see your insides, a reminder that you're wires and bolts. After digging deeper, you find the central software core. Normally, this would feel strange, but what is there to feel anymore? The people you care about are gone. You know that once you pull the core from your body, everything will disappear. The pain. The happiness. In one swift motion, you'll cease to exist.

Being on the precipice of a choice you cannot undo makes you stall and stare blankly into the distance. Part of you longs to have been one of those families ignorant of their fate. You think: if you were skin and bone, would you be crying right now? You try to imagine the feeling of a cool tear running down your cheek. You blink back into the moment and grip the core tightly; it's now or never.

With all of the strength you can muster, you hold your breath and pull. Suddenly, in only a split second, your life flashes before your eyes as if it's a spectrum of rainbow -- an ever longing pit of eternity reaching for high guidance out of the drowning sands like aureoles of bismuth. The memories send an unbearable pain throughout your body; it's a bittersweet goodbye to a life you grew to love, but it ends soon. This time, in that fraction of a moment, you manage to have a thought:

Is this what it means to be human?