

The Missing Link

The flashing lights, display monitors, and heart rate diagrams chimed in harmonic succession, but as efficient as the machines were at maintaining life, man still faded quietly into the dark. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeep. And Silence. Less than a whimper, a monotonic chirp served as the last testament of a dying man.

Bernie looked at his work monitor, read the correlating time, date, and location of patient number 567-125-0216, and after confirming all necessary information, submitted the data for central processing. By pushing just one key on his control panel, Bernie knew that a series of events were suddenly unfolding. Extraction droids were being dispatched to Housing Pod 74674. Additionally, all work and social contacts were being instantly messaged regarding patient number 567-125-0216's death. If the patient had still been functioning in an assigned work position, accommodations were being made for either internal promotion, or preferably, termination of the position. Whenever efficiency could be increased and waste terminated, it always was. Always.

Bernie thought about efficiency and waste, and weighed the mantra of society against his own labor function. He knew his work detail was highly outdated; all he really did was input data after citizens had passed, ensuring Extraction Droids were dispatched to the right hive. But Bernie knew that as long as he continued operating his control system, the position would remain open. After he was gone, he was sure his societal function would be eradicated. A computer program would be put in place to run patient termination collection software. Whenever efficiency could be increased...Always.

His mind did not linger on 567-125-0216 for long, but as he closed his screen for the final time, Bernie wondered what the patient had been known by in his own social circle. Bernie's

had heard from his manager that some people had ten, even fifteen personal contacts. That group would have constituted people who would have known the patient by more than just 567-125-0216. It would not have been by much more, but it would have been enough to refer to him by something other than his biochip number. Bernie wondered how many people knew him by his name rather than his biochip.

His manager Chadwick did. Bernie had more contact with him than anyone, and although they talked little, it was still refreshing to hear his name come from another human being. He also still talked occasionally with Ronald, his only remaining societal link. And then there was Julia. Bernie knew she probably tried to forget his name as much as she could, but until she expired, Bernie knew that some part of her would always remember him. That small group knew him by more than his number, although contact with them had become less and less.

Bernie never really understood why, but he always eventually rubbed people the wrong way. Chadwick said it was because he talked too much, but Ronald had other ideas. Ronald said it was because Bernie couldn't swallow his medicine, that just like a bad boy, he would not take what was good for him. Instead, Ronald said he chose to face the suffering and pain of self rather than embracing the sweet release of total numbness of acceptance. But what did Ronald know. He spent so much time in virtual simulation that Bernie suspected he really never talked to anyone else. Perhaps they were each other's final contacts. It would not have been surprising.

There was one more person who might have remembered his name, but Bernie did not know if she was even still alive. She had been called Lydia, and in his heart of hearts, in the secret place he shared with no one else, Bernie liked to dream that she had been his mother. He knew that of course that was most likely impossible. No one knew who his or her parents were, not anymore. It really didn't matter if she had been his biological mother, though. She had been

the closest thing to a parent that he had, so what difference was it if she actually conceived him. It was a nice thought, but it did not change how he felt about her or the effect that she had on him as a child.

Lydia had been the nursing and developmental coordinator for the children of Bernie's reproductive generation. There had been fifty other children along with him, twenty-five boys and twenty-five girls, and Lydia had been responsible for them all. The machines and computer simulations were making her position less and less necessary, but as hard as developers worked, a full substitution for maternal presence had yet to be perfected. Children still needed a caretaker, if only briefly, and so there was Lydia.

Children never knew if they were tube creations or actual live births. What they were aware of was that their earliest memories all had two common components. First, children all became aware at some point of their group caretaker, who in Bernie's case ended up being Lydia. The second shared memory, an imprint far more dominant Lydia, was the ever-present computer simulations and life support mechanisms that followed them from when they woke up right until their final disconnection before bed. Efficiency dictated that no one child's experience deviated from this course, and thus they were all collectively raised. Fifty children, Lydia, and the machines that cared for their every need. The machines changed them, washed them, fed them, and filled their days with fun and educational gaming programs. But when they got frightened, when subconscious nightmares woke them from their slumber, there was Lydia. Care and empathy had yet to be perfected by the machines.

Bernie knew that he had been a difficult child. Dreams had always been particularly vivid for him, rousing him from sleep to tears and panic more often than not. As a result he often spent many a night with Lydia's arms wrapped around him. She would comfort him and relax

him until he was able to fall back asleep. It was in that time that he developed such a strong connection with her. Even as he got older and became more capable of handling his own nightmares, Bernie often pushed his call button just to have Lydia come and check in on him. He liked to speak with her, and took the opportunity as often as he could. He knew that Lydia always tried to maintain a professional distance, but as the years went by, Bernie knew that she too started to enjoy their evenings together.

As he grew older and more inquisitive, most of the time they shared together was spent in deep conversation. Bernie found that he always had one new question after another. Lydia always did her best to answer his probes, but as time went by many of Bernie's questions went far beyond Lydia's knowledge. It seemed as if she had not considered many of his ideas before. Some she did not seem to comprehend, while others upset her greatly. She never told Bernie to stop asking, though, as his probes made her see life in a way that she never would have without him.

Bernie asked her things like where the other adults in their community lived. Where did their food and water come from, and the power that ran the machines? He also asked her about the computer simulations they all watched. When he was not in educational training, his simulation took him to places like Bora Bora and Bhutan. What he saw in his growth pod was nothing like the vivid, terrifyingly real simulations. He asked Lydia if those places really existed. She told him that they had once, a long time ago, but that it was no longer safe to travel to such places. That was why they had simulations. And besides, she assured him, simulations were better than the real things had ever been. Those answers pacified Bernie for some time, but eventually his mind kept wandering.

Something he kept coming back to over and over again was if anyone still went outside. Their growth pod had windows that showed fantastic, ever changing landscapes. When Bernie was nine, however, he had tried to break one of the windows so that he could go out and play in a waterfall right outside of his room. When he smashed his chair against the glass the window did not break. Instead, sparks flew from the destroyed projection screen and the beautiful waterfall disappeared, replaced by cracked plastic and the sterile steel walls that kept them safe. That was the maddest he had ever seen Lydia, and it had caused the visitation of two other adults for a consultation regarding Bernie. When they had left, she had yelled at him and told him that there was nothing outside. She told him that all that was left was waste and destruction. Bernie felt very terrible about upsetting Lydia, but eventually, even with her warnings, his curiosity outweighed his caution. Her answers about outside were never enough. If all that was left was waste and destruction, Bernie needed to know why people did not want to see the world as it really was.

Over time, Bernie became bound and determined to go outside himself. It had probably been so long since anyone had attempted such a feat that security had become lax. Bernie memorized the timing patterns of the vault doors that opened only for droid delivery and waited patiently until he saw a window. He told no one, not even Lydia, about his plan.

Looking back on it, Bernie wondered how he could have ever been so foolish. The plan itself was fine, but youth rarely sees far beyond immediate consequence. Sadly, Bernie was no exception. When the vault doors opened for the morning delivery, he made his break. Bernie slid under the ten thousand pound vault doors just as they slammed shut. He found himself in a long, metal corridor leading to a brilliantly white light. Almost immediately Bernie heard sirens behind him. Before he could panic and be captured, he ran as fast as he could towards the light.

The closer he got, the more he began to feel the warmth from outside. But as he barreled out from the corridor, nothing could have prepared him for what he saw next.

The landscape was brilliantly barren, with only the occasional metallic housing pod rising from up the bleak landscape. And the light, the terrible light. The beacon that had drawn him forward was now crushing down on him so intensely that Bernie felt sure he would collapse. It had to be well over one hundred, maybe even two hundred degrees. The combined shock of the nothingness he saw and the overwhelming heat made him fall dizzy, collapsing to his knees. Bernie gasped for air, but found that to be just as hostile, searing his lungs and stinging his eyes. It took just under two minutes for him to lose total consciousness.

When he finally reawakened, Bernie found himself alone in the hospital wing. He was connected to wires and monitors running to and from his body to the machines that kept him alive. The juxtaposition in landscape nearly sent him into a second shock. He began to thrash and tear at the tubes entering his body, screaming for Lydia. Within seconds, aides rushed in, subdued him, and sedated him back to nothingness.

The second time Bernie awoke in the hospital ward he was not alone. Instead the oldest man he had ever seen was standing at the foot of his bed, staring and waiting. When he saw that Bernie was awake, he introduced himself as the head doctor of the hospital. He told Bernie that he had received third degree burns on his arms and legs, sun poisoning, and probable lung damage. Bernie asked who had saved him, and the doctor informed him that extraction droids had pulled him back into his developmental floor. Apparently his state had been very shocking to the other children, and the whole episode had created a huge mess. Bernie asked where Lydia was. The doctor did not answer immediately, but instead looked at him with a gaze that seemed almost sympathetic.

He told Bernie that there had been a total review of his floor and that Lydia had broken several rules of protocol. Their whole pod had been set back due to his episode; it was a potential lost generation. Lydia had been terminated from her position, and a new caretaker had been appointed. Bernie asked if he could see Lydia, but the doctor told him she was gone. He did reach into his breast pocket, though, and handed Bernie a note. It was very rare to see anything handwritten, and it took Bernie some time to decipher Lydia's scribbles. When he did, he saw that she had written very little. The note said, "Stop asking questions. There are no answers. There is only You. L."

After Bernie had recovered he had not been moved back into his group pod. Doctors told him that a return would have been too traumatic for the other children. Instead, he was prematurely moved to an adult housing floor where he was given a societal function. He was also required to undergo counseling simulations several hours a day. Other than his online contact with the manager of the patient termination collection software unit, and his simulated behavioral counselor, Bernie did not see another person for nearly four years.

It was shortly after his twentieth cycle that Bernie was given the chance to reintroduce himself to other members of society. Aside from interpersonal contact related to assigned work positions, the main form of socialization for adults was in chat rooms and simulated gaming systems that pitted people with similar personality traits against each other. That was how Bernie met Ronald, and the small collection of people who would spend their online time with him. Out of that select group Bernie only ever met Ronald in person. Everyone else he asked seemed to prefer the digital realm to the alternative. Bernie did not think he could blame them, but he never could stop asking to meet them in person. Perhaps that was why his social contacts continually whittled down until there were almost none left at all.

Bernie always suspected that he was being monitored. It made sense after his relationship with Lydia and his failed escape. After yet another social contact blocked Bernie due a conversation that had upset him, the head doctor whom he had met in the hospital came to visit him once more. The doctor told him that he had personally modeled Bernie's adaptation counseling, but that as to date he was unsatisfied with the results. He asked Bernie why he so actively sought physical contact, but Bernie had no answer for him. Bernie naturally assumed that he was going to be put back into seclusion, officially cast away from the self-isolating society that wanted nothing to do with him. To his great surprise, however, the doctor had other plans.

Julia. More than Ronald, even more than Lydia, Bernie regretted most how his time with Julia had been spent. The head doctor told Bernie that although rare, some people still required physical interaction. Simulation software cured loneliness and sexual desire for almost ninety nine percent of subjects, but there were always anomalies. The doctor proposed taking compatibility exams and seeing if a potential match could be made. Bernie took to the challenge with a vigor and enthusiasm that he had never before known, and after several rounds, the computers finally found a potential partner for Bernie. Julia.

Bernie was so excited to meet someone new, someone potentially more like him that he did not eat for the two days prior to the introduction. Despite all of his planning and worrying, though, his initial meeting with Julia was terribly awkward. Bernie did not know what to say to Julia, and she seemed just as inept as him. Frozen in humiliation, he felt time crawl on like some cruel torture. With so little practice in socialization, and most of it spent in gaming arenas, he had no notion of how to act with a female counterpart. But to his great bewilderment, Julia did

not abandon their efforts of union. She continued to visit him, meeting once a week for over six months. It was one of the greatest periods of time in Bernie's life.

Their relationship had fallen into such a comfortable groove that Bernie was shocked when one day, with no warning Julia had shown up and asked him point blank when it was he intended to mate. The question was so bold and direct Bernie found himself speechless. He was not about to turn down the offer, but with no background in romance, he awkwardly proposed an encounter on their next meeting. Julia agreed as if they were concluding a business transaction, but the arrangement was set.

Arousal and anticipation made Bernie's week nearly unbearable, but when the day arrived, the actual event came and went so fast that he wondered what it was he had been so nervous about. The only negative was came after their one shared night. Julia cancelled her next three meetings with him, and Bernie was once again left alone. He felt that he must have been so terrible that she had returned to simulations. He was certain that he would never see her again.

It took four awful weeks until Julia agreed to see him again. She gave no explanation for her lapse, but told him that she had news. She had conceived a child, and had determined to carry it to delivery. An actual live birth! Bernie was so excited, but with no method for coping, he told her awkwardly he would help in anyway necessary. They embraced methodically, and Julia once again left him alone.

They resumed meeting regularly as the child they conceived continued to grow inside Julia. It was in the sixth month that once again Julia broke their routine and did not appear at Bernie's housing pod. The next week followed the same, as did the one after that. Eventually Bernie searched for her housing unit, and upon finding it, went uninvited to see what had happened.

It took ten minutes of banging on the metal door, hammering so forcefully that his hands bled and tarnished the clean, cold steel of the hallway for Julia to finally come out and face him. Immediately Bernie could tell that something terrible had happened. Julia told him that there had been a complication in the pregnancy, and that their child had been lost. Bernie saw true grief on Julia's face, something he had never before seen. Unbeknownst to Bernie, the empathy that Julia sought from him required practice, practice humanity had long since abandoned. He had no way to respond to her grief, or his own for that matter. His only attempt at comfort was telling her that they should try again. It was the only idea he had, but it was an idea that was apparently too much for her to handle. She slammed the door in Bernie's face, leaving both of them alone in their sorrow. That was the last time he had ever seen Julia.

After losing Julia, Bernie became despondent. His work suffered, he withdrew himself from online activities, and he found little desire to even rise from bed. After several weeks of carrying on in such a way, the head doctor once again visited him in his housing unit. He told Bernie that his supervisor's had become concerned, and that things couldn't continue to carry on in such a way. Bernie asked the doctor just how it was he was supposed to carry on. He asked him why it was that anyone should want to live in such a way. The doctor sat down on the bed beside Bernie and began to speak.

He told Bernie that he did not have all the answers he sought, and that he probably shouldn't even share the ones he had. The doctor said that long before him, before any of them, man hadn't always lived in such a way. He didn't have the details on how things had been, but simply knew that life had been carried on in another fashion. For some reason, though, the path of man and his style of life had led to destruction. That was why the outside world was now so dangerous and toxic to human life, a fact that Bernie had seen firsthand.

The doctor told Bernie that as a result of the destruction of man, the rules of society had been changed. It was their job now to live, to survive and to exist without worry or care. When man had competed with one another, when he had strived to conquer mountains and tame oceans, he had ultimately pushed himself to the point of extinction. The new world only existed because man had finally removed himself from the equation. Man, it seemed, was the only incurable variable.

In the new society, work duties served only as superficial fillers of time. Personal interactions were kept at a minimum, and machines became responsible for the heavy lifting of life. Simulations filled the interpersonal needs of the public, and simulations never created the competition or desire that had led to the great disaster. The doctor told Bernie that nearly all of the remaining citizenry accepted these changes after a period of time. It had become a part of their genetic makeup in a way. To almost everyone, blind acceptance became far more tolerable than the loneliness of self-realization.

Bernie asked the doctor why it was he couldn't accept what life had become, but all the doctor could do was shake his head. He told Bernie that a small percentage of people never could accept the new parameters of society. His only advice for Bernie was to deny the questions that made him seek more. Living in peace, he said, was the highest goal he could ever hope to achieve. As the doctor stood to leave, Bernie asked him what would happen if that was not enough. The closing vault doors gave Bernie his final answer.

After finishing the data input for patient number 567-125-0216, Bernie got up from his work computer and walked to the window. It showed a simulation of a forest drenched in moonlight. Standing there looking out he thought back over all the people he had met and lost. If he could have changed himself, he would have. But there was something deep of inside him,

inside all of the people he knew, which was not as it should have been. Whatever had happened in the past had created the rules for how they currently lived. But in society's new design they had forgotten to include something. They were all fed, cared for, and entertained as much as they could desire, but they were always isolated from one another.

Living in his community, so close but yet so far from his fellow man, Bernie knew he was always alone. Since his last visit with the doctor, he had become convinced that he was the only one who understood the desperation of loneliness, the missing part of him that was driving him mad. Looking out his simulated window upon the world that was no more, Bernie accepted the loneliness as his fate and determined that with nothing else to do, that it was time to leave.

During his four year banishment after his first escape attempt, Bernie had gotten to know his room better than he thought anyone ever should. The room was perfect in almost all regards. It had a feeding dock, simulation center, waste room, and sleeping quarters. In four years Bernie had found no abnormality, minus one. The ventilation system in his room had four entry points. Three were small vents on the floor, only one foot by six inches in diameter. The final vent was located directly above Bernie's bed. That one was almost four feet wide. Placing a chair on the bed, he had found that he was able to reach the larger vent. With some work, he had been able to pry off the grate and enter the ventilation system.

His first explorations had not gone far. Bernie had simply roamed over the floor he shared with his fellow citizens. He watched people, not perversely, but longingly. He wished that he could go and speak to them, but knew if he did that they would not answer. They would have turned him away.

As time went on he explored farther and farther into the shafts. He found the room where the tube creations were grown. He also found the room where the live births happened. Once

the children were removed from the mother, Bernie saw the same look of grief he had seen on Julia's face. That look held some key as to what was missing inside of all of them, but Bernie could never decide what it was. It was all too much, too confusing, but it made him explore on. Finally, on one of his furthest expeditions, Bernie had found an exit hatch.

From his first experience with the outside world, Bernie knew that daytime was far too dangerous. That was why he waited until night to try and see what the outside world held for him. The air still burnt his lungs, but without the heat of the sun, Bernie was able to look out and absorb his surroundings. They were the only real ones he had ever seen.

Nothing had changed since his first trip, but somehow under the mystical light of the moon, Bernie had found a world that was far more enchanting than any simulation he had tried to accept. He visited there often, and it had become the only place where he found peace. That was the world he was heading for that evening, the only one he felt he belonged in anymore.

Bernie made his long trip through the shafts, past the sedate and accepting citizenry he called neighbors, and eventually high above to the roof of his housing unit. The moon had been full that evening, but as emerged onto the rooftop, it was beginning to sink. He was not upset over missing the peak of the moon, for Bernie had timed his journey with a purpose. He knew that as the moon sank, the sun would be getting closer and closer to rising.

Bernie had no intention of returning before that point. Instead, he had determined that with no answer as to what was missing inside of him, inside of everyone, that he would greet the sun once again. The only difference from his first trip would be that this time he would stay and see where it took him.

The moon set, and as it did, Bernie felt the first waves of heat break over the horizon. As they did, he reached into his breast pocket and removed his letter from Lydia. Looking at it,

Bernie felt moisture come into his eyes. He was not sure if it was the toxic air, or something else deep inside himself. He grasped the letter tightly as the sun finally broke over the horizon. He thought of Ronald, and of Lydia, and of Julia, and wondered if they would think of him. He wondered, and he wept.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep. And silence. Always.