

Forever Day

As he rounded the corner Loic Olyalin could see that the bar was empty again. He never understood why he expected anyone to be there. For eighty years he had visited the place every other morning and it had always been empty. Still there was room for hope.

He crossed the street and when he reached the door he paused far enough away so as not to cause it to open. For a moment he listened wondering if he would catch the sound of others moving in the city. Of course there was nothing. The drones went about in silent execution of their maintenance and cleaning duties, excess wildlife was kept at bay. The city, much like Loic's life, was frozen in time, waiting for people to return.

A step forward caused the door to slide open and he walked into the cooler air of the bar.

He picked up a cup of coffee from the corner of the counter on his way past, and took the same seat at the window he always did. There was the usual selection of mid morning snacks on offer and he choose one of his favourite pastries from the menu. A few moments later a drone placed the food in front of him. He thanked the little creature regardless of whether it could understand him.

One of the reasons he always chose this bar was for its automation. There was no AI proprietor to welcome him or ask him how his day was going. No waitress that wanted to talk to him about the day's news. This was one of the few places in the city where everything was retro in style. Not that there were many AIs left in the city now either. He had seen a few over the years, mostly those who still wanted to undertake their roles. There was one particular street cleaner he saw most days. He was never sure if it was an AI or just a drone controlled by the cities management systems. Although he was not even unsure if the AI that looked after the city was around anymore. He had not spoken to it for over thirty years. Maybe it too had left things to a group of auto's.

Loic checked a clock as he brought up the news feeds. There was plenty of time before the sports conference he was due to speak at started. Headlines from across the colonies floated in front of him and he looked for anything that might grab his interest. The cities emptiness did not reflect the amount of activity that was happening elsewhere. There was, of course, a time when all these meetings and discussions had taken place in cities. That was one of the reasons Loic had moved back from the outlands. Virtual meetings had happened, they had been going on since the first day humans created a way to communicate over large distances. Loic remembered his working years as a lecturer (something he now did just to pass the time). He had held both virtual and physical lectures then and enjoyed them equally. What he really missed though, what, for him, had never been replaced by the virtual meetings were the off the cuff chats.

Staring out at the street through the long curved window of the bar Loic caught sight of the cleaner that patrolled this area. It moved down the centre of the street two lights flashing – one on each end – to give additional warning to humans or AI who were not paying attention. Of course, there was no one to warn anymore.

Loic's thoughts returned to how things had changed so much. As the virtual world had grown, and with the development of implanted data feeds, people had changed their habits. There was no need to go to the bar down the street to meet up when you could talk to your friends while sat in the eternal summer of a virtual park. Those who used to walk around the corner to call on their friends now just stood outside a virtual front door. That was just a fad of course. After a time a quick knock to a friend, to find out if they fancied meeting up, became the norm. That was when the cities started to empty.

There was no reason for people to live together when everyone was just next door in the virtual world. Changes in technology had already made it possible for people to have the house they wanted in the location they desired. Now they could do that and still have all their friends close at hand; virtually if not physically. Even the word virtual had started to erode away. Its use to denote something that was not real had disappeared a long time ago as advances had made the computer created environments seem as real as the world people were born into. Since then it had been used to differentiate between things that happened to ones physical body from what happened in the generated world. As virtual life became more prolific, merging seamlessly in with the lives of people, so the difference between real and virtual disappeared. Now people asked each other if they were going to meet up. It never mattered where or how.

The fact that Loic still lived in a city was considered old fashioned. Some thought it was just a phase he was going through; rebelling against popular culture. While others moved to houses on the top of mountains, at the bottoms of seas, or floating in orbital habitats, they presumed he lived in the city because that was his thing. Which was both exactly the reason and at the same time not quite the truth of it. For Loic it was his lack of affinity with the virtual world. He liked people. He liked being around them, knowing they were talking in the background, being too loud, laughing at each other's jokes. His friends told him he could experience all of this in the virtual environment. You can have all that and more, one of his friends had once told him as they talked about it at a party. Loic had looked around at the other people talking and dancing. He had glanced down at his drink, and even though it all felt real, even though he could taste the food and hear the music, feel the brush of an arm against his, he knew in his heart that it was only make believe.

He had sometimes wondered if there were other people who felt as he did. Logic told him that there must be, but he had no way of finding them; none that appealed to him anyway. To set up a virtual meeting for people who disliked meeting in the virtual world never seemed right. He was not lonely though, he stayed in contact with his friends. He sometimes attended conferences and exhibitions while his body sat at home. What he missed was real contact with other people. He held a secret desire that one day things would change. Society would come back to reality and once again his city would be filled with life.

Seki came to the corner of Benjayne and turned left onto Reillette Avenue. Some of the old ways of life he liked, others had a time and place that had gone. The naming of roads in cities was one of those he was glad had stayed around. It gave character to a place. People, be they AI or Human, associated names with feelings and if a road lacked a name it lost something.

One of the simple things Seki enjoyed as he worked was reminiscing about days long gone, when the city had been populated. His cleaning patrols were another simple task he indulged in. It did not mean a lot now. There was so little activity in the city that he had hardly anything to do. Autumn was his favourite time. Leaves would pile in corners where the wind had pushed them and he could have hours of fun chasing down the last few that tried to get away.

He never quite understood why humans had moved away from the cities. To a certain extent it made sense, after all he spent much of his spare time meeting up with humans and they were no more complicated than AI. There were always a number of popular theories doing the rounds in the discussion groups. The idea that AI and humans were just different in the way they thought, had now been replaced by the theory that each group tried to spend more time doing the thing that did not come naturally to it. The world of any AI was the generated one and humans, of course, were born into the physical world. This meant that Humans saw the virtual world as advancement, while AI saw their ability to interact directly with nature as more of an achievement. Some claimed the increase in AIs taking on human form was one proof of this.

If the truth was known, Seki had never given it a great deal of thought. He was more interested in competing in whatever sports events he could. He loved the rush of sky racing and to offset that frenzied pastime he did what he liked to call his day job. Both made him equally happy.

At the corner of Reillette Avenue he saw the man who often sat in the window of Hopper's Bar. Seki watched him as the warning lights on the front and back of the cleaning unit reflected off the curved window. Sometimes he felt like stopping to talk to the man, but it never seemed right to intrude. The Human made no effort to acknowledge Seki and that made him wonder if the man was unhappy. It was an odd thing to do, sit in a bar on your own, but then some people, whether they were AI or human, were often prone to odd behaviour.

Seki could think of far better places to sit than an empty bar. There was a woman a few miles away in the northern part of the city. She spent her days in the park feeding the birds. Then there was the man who lived on the other side of the now abandoned entertainment plaza who liked to fish in the lake. They both appeared to be content.

With a mental shrug, Seki turned the corner and continued on his rounds. He would take a break in a few minutes. There was a sports conference he wanted watch. One of the speakers was Loic Olyalin and he always enjoyed the man's talks on the developments in recreational sports.