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Life as a Machine

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Life as a Machine

Angehyka Cava

“What are you listening to?”

The fact that I can hear her words means that I’m not playing my music loudly enough. I push the volume button a few notches higher. For a few moments I enjoy a blend of pummeling riffs and guttural vocals, driven at a moderate speed with syncopated percussion. The heaviness of the bridge is about to mellow into a melodic chorus when I am interrupted again.

“What are you listening to?”

She matches the volume increase I had set on my phone. Both the crass hooligans in the back of the bus and the half-deaf bus driver are able to hear her. I’m usually good at ignoring people, but I must admit that it is a hard task when they are speaking right in your ears. Lucy should know by now that I don’t want to talk. I never do. Yet we go through this boring routine every morning on the school bus. I tug my earphones out and shove them into my right hoodie pocket.

“Nothing now.”

“Well, what *were* you listening to?”

Being asked about my musical preferences is a pet peeve of mine. Nobody in this ignorant hick town has heard of my favorite bands so I always end up giving detailed explanations about what kind of music they make. And I end up wasting the time of both the interrogator and myself because they never understand what I’m talking about.

I pretend I don't hear Lucy and pull out my copy of *The Language of Literature*. I don't really care about my homework, but I'd rather stare at this book than continue this conversation.

When we pull into school ten minutes before the morning announcements, I am about three-quarters done with the reading assignment. That's more than enough to get through the daily discussion in Ms. Riley's first period Honors English class. I set my backpack on the floor next to my assigned seat, which happens to be beside my boyfriend Jack. He's always here before I am, skimming through the textbook. But today his seat is empty, and it remains that way for the rest of the class.

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I never really paid attention to Jack until he randomly sat next to me during lunch last year. Nobody sat with me by choice, so I had no idea how to respond when it happened. Even more shocking was when he said, "Hey, you wanna go out with me sometime?"

I had to tug off my earphones for this question. If it had come from anybody else, I probably would have shut it down right away. But Jack was handsome, and much more polite than my other peers. He was a good catch, but too good to be true. "Why are you asking me?"

"You seem nice. So, you up for dinner?"

"As nice as this sounds, I don't really want a boyfriend right now, sorry."

I was about to get up and leave when he grabbed my arm. "I don't want a girlfriend either. Look, everyone thinks I'm gay. Mike keeps bugging me about it."

“Well, are you gay? Why does it matter?” I asked as I decided to take a seat. I hadn’t realized guys like Jack even had problems.

“Yeah, I am. It’s really fucking up my reputation.”

“So you want to pretend date?” I clarified, and he nodded in response. “We don’t need to do anything romantic, right?”

“I’d really prefer not to. Just be my cover, please? Come to homecoming with me or something?”

“Let me think about it,” I responded. And I sat there for a minute, going over this deal. It’s not like I had anything to lose from this; time meant nothing to me. “Sure, whatever.”

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The rest of the day passes in a mediocre blur. None of the teachers give me any grief for leaving my earbuds and hoodie on during their classes. If anyone talks to me, I don’t hear them.

Since it’s Wednesday, Mom and her cherry-colored Camry wait for me in the parking lot. I take a seat on the tan, heated leather. Such a nice contrast from the grimy L-shaped seats on the bus. From this passenger window that is unbothered by mold and rust, I can almost appreciate Vancouver High School. Despite having stood for a hundred and twenty years, it’s still so full of life. Every year it has improved, be it with a significant increase in student size or a new paint job. Unlike people, who deteriorate over the years and gradually lose everything that means something to them.

The ride home is unusually quiet. Mom seems to be focused on the weather even though it’s just another average autumn day in the Pacific Northwest. Normally I’m a big fan of sitting in silence, but this

time it's like I'm locked in a cage of awkwardness where the only key is conversation.

"Is everything okay?" I ask. When I turn toward Mom, I notice that her cheeks have thin rivers of crystal liquid running over them and the whites of her eyes are a pale shade of pink. I hope it's due to really bad allergies, but hay fever is unlikely considering it's late November. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out before she shuts it quickly. *I'll take that as a no.*

"Have you not heard the news? Jack is dead. He shot himself." With sobs obfuscating her speech, I can barely understand Mom.

I let out a snicker. It's my go-to reaction for when I don't know how to react, but I don't think it worked well for this particular situation. The only other thing I can muster up is a halfhearted "That's sad."

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Netflix is an important hobby of many people my age, but the only time I ever watch television is when I really want to distract myself from my responsibilities. Since I have a unit test for physics tomorrow morning, I decide to prepare myself for it by watching *Seinfeld*.

I find myself laughing at one of Jerry's standup jokes when there's a knock on the door. When I peek out the window, I see Jack's mom. I've only met her once or twice before, but she's aged ten years since I last saw her. Crying people make me uncomfortable. I don't want to open the door, but I'm obligated to do so since she saw me looking at her.

"Uh, hi, Ms. Wilson. It's a tragedy, isn't it? Mom's making pasta for dinner. Wanna come inside?"

As she enters, she wipes her face with a beige handkerchief, staining it and her cheeks with charcoal-colored streaks. *I'll take that as a yes.* She makes herself comfortable in my preferred spot of the couch and I awkwardly position myself in the kitchen doorway. "I'll go call my mom; she's probably upstairs."

"Aria, I wanted to talk to you," blurts Ms. Wilson. That's a shame because I don't want to talk to her. But I stick around anyway. "Do you know why Jack did it?"

"To be honest, I didn't even know it happened," I reply.

Ms. Wilson's drawn-on left eyebrow raises and she purses her unnaturally thick lips. With all the botox she's had, I'm surprised her face can still move. Jack looked nothing like her, and I'm not sure if it's because of her surgeries or because he took after his dead dad. I don't miss much about him, but he had such nice eyes, as deep and cerulean as the sea, outlined with long brown lashes. I wonder how they look now that they've probably clouded up. After my grandpa died his chocolate-colored eyes turned a light blue.

"You don't know anything, huh?" Ms. Wilson chuckles a bit, but I don't think she finds my lack of knowledge about Jack funny. Maybe she also doesn't know how to feel about this case. "Nobody knows. This whole thing is so weird. He seemed fine before this."

Before his suicide, I always thought of Jack as an incredibly normal guy. Boring, even. He was on a couple of sports teams but never the MVP, he got good grades but never the highest, and he had a lot of friends but not any who really cared about him. On Facebook they're all posting their condolences, but just like me, they didn't realize

there was something wrong with him and did nothing to help. At least I don't pretend to care.

I don't reply to Ms. Wilson and it doesn't seem she has anything more to say, so she simply gets up and leaves.

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As I step out of the car my cheek is greeted with a cold slap of water sliding off the tree branch hovering a few feet above me. An unusually cool breeze whispers across my face and neck, advising me to pull my oversized coat closer to my body. With every step I make, I hear the crunch of the warm-colored leaves under my boots, like a prolonged version of the sound made when you break a Hershey bar into multiple pieces.

The puddle in front of me shows a blurred and incomplete reflection of me, a pitch-black silhouette matching the clothes everyone wears today. I can't see the face that Jack somehow felt intrigued to ask to homecoming, my muddy lifeless eyes, my bloodless pale skin. Even at Jack's funeral I feel more dead than he is.

I enter the church and take a seat at the back, avoiding contact with any of my classmates or Ms. Wilson. They're all in the middle of a prayer, eyes closed, and they don't see me anyway. When the prayer ends, Ms. Wilson goes into a lengthy speech about how talented and nice Jack was and everyone except me starts sobbing. But the next words she says actually make me feel something. "I'll be passing the mic around for anyone who wants to talk about Jack."

Ms. Wilson gives the microphone to some lady who looks like her clone, but with grayer hair and more surgery. She turns out to be Jack's grandma and starts going into his childhood in great detail. It

feels like I'm sitting there for twelve hours. But there's a ray of sunshine in her eyes as she speaks. After that it's some kid I've seen around school, a really big freshman on the football team with Jack. During his stories, he simultaneously smiles and cries. I don't remember when I last did either of those things.

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After the procession the guests are ushered into a room full of refreshments. Sandwiches and soda aren't really my thing so I try to leave, but Lucy blocks the only exit. With her smudged makeup, she resembles a dingy raccoon. I didn't think she even knew Jack.

"Hey, how are you holding up? It seems like you kept your tears in," she says. She has a bad habit of swinging her arms as she speaks, causing her to spill her Sprite onto the floor.

"Honestly? I don't care."

I'm expecting her to move aside, but she stays in my way.

"That must be nice," she replies.

I want to tell her that it isn't nice living like a machine.