

## “Surface Tension”

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15 years old

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I glide upward toward the ocean's surface with smooth and efficient strokes. The glassy light blue water makes it easy to see around me, and I catch just a glimpse of a shimmering angelfish before it darts out of my eyeline. When I close my eyes, my full focus is drawn to the slight mechanical creaking noise that each of my arms make when I paddle forward. I try settling into a pattern: *reach, creak, click, reach, creak, click, reach, creak, click*. The pleasure that this simple repetition brings me is just one in a list of many ways that I am not, and will never be, like Them. The Livelies, or the biologically-produced homosapiens, are the ones who get to live their lives without considering order or the consequences of their actions.

Before the Great Climate Disaster of 2087, the Livelies were the only ones who inhabited Earth. They were said to have lived an even more reckless type of lifestyle than they do today; burning appalling amounts of fossil fuels on a daily basis, allowing litter to accumulate on the ground, and massacring entire grand forests. However, when the environment was left in shambles after the Disaster, the world's finest scientists were forced to put their minds together and find a solution to the crisis. It was then that the first of my kind, the Restorative Automated Devices, or RADs, were built with the intention of cleaning up the mess that had been created. In the years that followed, more advanced and specialized generations of RADs were launched. Some of us reduce air pollution, others manage destruction on land, and as for me, I am responsible for controlling temperature, acidification levels, and waste in the ocean.

My forehead suddenly breaks the water's surface, and I feel a cool breeze tickle my gills. The fans built into my cheeks begin to whirl to life and dry off my face. I squint my eyes, trying to see past the sun's blinding glare on the water and into the distance near the shore. Two teenage Livelies, a girl and a boy, are splashing around where the waves break. Although I understand my importance in preserving the environment, sometimes I imagine a life where I could live like them; free from the regimen of my responsibilities, and acting without care for repercussions.

I watch as the boy splashes water at the girl and she tilts her head back, letting out a loud shriek of laughter that carries over to my distant position treading water. I mimic the motion, whipping my head back as if drenched by water, and opening my mouth in the same turned-up shape but without emitting any sound. *What was it like to laugh? How did it feel?* I stare yearningly at the pair. When the girl runs her fingers through her blonde curls, trying to brush them out of her face, I again do the same, tracing my fingers longingly over my rough bald scalp. The fantasy is nice, and for a moment, I am almost there; free, blissful, without mind for reality. All sense of idealism is destroyed in an instant when the boy jokingly throws his plastic water bottle in the girl's direction and lets it be taken by the waves. A code 9-W alert is immediately sounded in my inner system, warning me of the waste in my district. I snap out of the fantasy and am reminded of my role in this world: I am a fixer, a cleaner, a solver of problems. *How could I be one of them when my whole life revolves around serving them?* I take one last look over at their image of paradise, embracing every detail of their toothy smiles, the

baby-blue sky, and the warmth of the sunlight reflecting off of their cheeks. I close my eyes, release a long defeated exhale, and return to where I was meant to be: below the surface.