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A Bridge Between

(1st Place, The Molloy Common Reading Program Inspired Works Contest)

The rainbow of artificial light stretched across the vast digitized sky, spanning its LED glow across the brightly colored city. The projected image of clouds hovered amidst an artificial sun that replaced its predecessor. The warm, radiating glow of flashing lights shone through the windows of every home as the streets lay empty while the auditory stimulation of advertisements echoed through the open avenues.

Through the lens of digital contacts, a virtual cloak placed a mask over the natural world creating an augmented reality in place of an old, sensory state of being that had now been removed irrevocably. Sensation: pain, sadness, passion all were fading into the distance like a decaying memory. Thought had been derailed, controlled, and ultimately fractured under the influence of stimulation and digital noise.

Education, in its former sense, had become irrelevant. No longer did students need to sit at desks with pencils in their hands. The endless trails extending deep into the digital world wholly and immediately occupied every child from conception until adulthood and beyond. Travel had also been eradicated, as geographical location became arbitrary. The senses could be stimulated artificially to experience the grandeur of the Grand Canyon, or the smell of the morning air upon the Alps. And emotional sadness had become diminished with the constant and unrelenting nature of technology. The heart did not have time to wince or to bleed. Psychology had moved from a room to a lens, and any pain could be dealt with within the
individual’s eye. Coping with the nature of existence no longer incited a struggle. The mind became its own mechanism as the feelings themselves vanished under the overarching cloak of technology. The heart, no more — the mind, no more — until life itself existed within the infinity of the digital realm.

The natural world had become entirely abhorrent and unbearable to look upon with human eyes. The rapid and unstoppable integration of technology trained the retina to appall the image and reject its substance, until the natural world had been eradicated from the face of the Earth entirely. The visual pain of trees, open fields, and even the smallest insect caused the most violent, splitting agony throughout the brain until the eyes of the afflicted rested on the warm and comforting glow of a digital gaze. Faces walk around adorned with digitized contacts meant to ease the agony of perceiving the remaining remnants of the Old World still present — human flesh, steel and the ground. Ultimately, these features too would be eradicated with the coming years, but the New World still gleamed with the imaginative glow of a child of the past — teeming with energy and vibrancy. The subtle nature of humanity had almost entirely dissipated. Friendships were gone. Relationships had only become necessities that lingered deep within the primordial mind, but pleasure had entirely been revoked from the actions of lust and passion. Mouth-to-mouth dialogue sank to base terms meant only to communicate base ideas, as the digital world now encapsulated the entirety of human existence.

Ramsey Orpheus remembered the days before the New World began; he was 30 years old when the shift had been completed. Now, at the tail end of his life — gray, old tired and weak — he walked the empty streets alone and silent, reminiscent and distant. An outsider conflicted with the overbearing nature of his surroundings, Ramsey had been
indoctrinated into the New World hesitantly, at first, but eventually, his morals waivered with the persistent hand of technology bearing down onto every living portion of his life.

There were those who repented, he remembered. The New World did not come overnight; no, it happened steadily, and there were those who fought against it fervently. The stairwell to acceptance was one littered with fractures, but technology’s overall magnitude reigned over all. Oppressors were never exterminated. Those who opposed simply lost their fervor with the coming of time until their voices became irrelevant to the majority. At first, virtual reality was used sparingly and in short bursts, but with its emergence arose a dependence. The eyes of people became starved for digital stimulation, and in their yearning a new age began.

Still, his memories emerged from the repressed portions of his brain. While most of his rememberings had become convoluted with the inexorable over-stimulation of the digital realm, some moments of clarity prevailed as a passageway into a not-so-distant past that seemed so very far away.

He remembered the trips his family took as he was a child.

*Midnight. Sitting in the tailbed of the truck, the open air inhaled. Crossing the road towards the Delaware River, the glow of the last street light dissipating behind. Stepping onto the cold ground, the river’s calm consciousness becoming audible as sight set upon the vast and unending sky above. Color and imagination bounded together within view as stars hovered weightlessly within the Great Unknown. The sounds of nature — the only sounds that spiraled through the midnight air.*

Regaining consciousness, Ramsey pushed down his contacts over his eyes. Even he, in his old age, still could not view the natural world for more than a few minutes at a time.
until he, unconsciously, had to place his digitized lenses over his weakening eyes.

It was Fall, or that was what the calendar said. Such trivialities were no longer considered, for weather, season and change were no longer factors within existence. Only the effervescent nature of technology, and the unavoidable pathway to death progressed with each coming day. But Fall it was. Droves of digital trees mimicked the colors of fall — yellow and orange leaves contrasted against the dark brown of tree branches. Even the air, artificially conditioned, matched the slight chill of autumn as he walked slowly through the synthetic cityscape Ramsey remembered the golden arches of trees spreading across wooded trails that he would walk with his wife.

*Her golden hair radiated with the warm amber of autumn. Her green eyes danced amongst the colors of falling leaves and sunlit lakes. Her cold hand and elegant frame glided effortlessly across the ground — her smile raising with the afternoon wind.*

She died during the days of transition.

Bumping into a younger man entranced within his virtual reality, Ramsey’s dream fell out of his mind and became lost amongst the digital ether. He attempted to retain her face, but it blurred as his eyes became pained with the memory of natural light, and her cold hand dissipated as sensation grew weaker with each coming moment.

The human frame had lost all its intrigue. The body no longer aroused curiosity — the subtle moments of life no longer excited the mind into happiness. The digital age had stripped the flesh-like pleasures that humanity once held and replaced this void with artificiality. The eyes, the hands, the mind had become desensitized by the new age until the physical world no longer bore any meaning to the vessel.
Walking amongst the distracting nature of the streets, and enraptured by the events occurring within his lenses, Ramsey lost himself for over an hour, entranced by the images flooding before him. Tailored images sparking his interest kept him engaged and wholly unaware of the world surrounding him for minute after minute, as the sun rose and peaked on a bright and typical afternoon. Regaining his physical place and removing his lenses, he looked up towards the hordes of digital advertisements grasping his attention and the sound of digitized music accompanying their grandeur. Somehow, their physical sight lacked in comparison to that of their virtual counterparts. Looking around further, he realized that everything seemed to lack a vibrancy, a digital luster that existed within the digital world. The natural world seemed undeniably dull and dreary. For a moment, Ramsey felt a growing sadness emanating from his chest — a distant, nearly foreign feeling he had not felt for some time. It grew steadily as the image of his wife re-entered his mind. It increased as his hands began to sweat, and eyes began to ache with the agony of sight. He squinted strongly to keep her image floating within his mind, but his hands disobeyed as instinct prevailed. He placed his contacts over his eyes and his feelings weakened and subsided. His mind was clean.

Ramsey walked on unoppressed for some time until his knee began to ache. Technology had not yet removed pain from the body, and Ramsey would likely not witness such an alteration. Becoming more and more aware of his pain, he decided that his daily walk should end. He began, slowly, to walk towards his home somewhere on the other side of town. His escapades caused him to lose his direction, but his lenses directed him on his way towards his destination.

The ache continued, but it began to hurt more than usual. His weakening frame constantly grew worse with each
day, and his knees wore out brutally as he continued to try to restore his old life.

_The daily walks through the bustling city streets — her coat pressed gently against his. Store front displays gleaming with elegance._

As his pain increased, his head grew heavy with pain, and he had to remove his lenses. Looking upward, he saw the remnants of an old passenger rail, and it reminded him of a trip he had taken some time ago.

_The train rattled on the tracks as it approached the tunnel. She was leaning against the pole as light scattered throughout the car. For one moment, her frame would be illuminated by a dim glow, and then she would pass into darkness. She was standing there, lost in her own thoughts, engaged in reverie. Her dreamlike glance inspired his eyes as he began to smile._

As the pain increased, so too did his memory. Visions of an old existence, emerging like a butterfly from its cocoon, clawed themselves out from the crevices of his mind. The digital world paled its light and fell beneath the intense scenes within the brain. His hands clenched his knee, and his teeth grinded against one another. His eyes remained focused as he looked up and decided, through his agony, that his old life would return. He would force it to return. There would be no other option. He moved with added vigor towards his home as he began to realize his surroundings. Consciousness of the physical realm was returning aggressively as he blocked out the sounds of advertisements and the temptation to cover his eyes with the lenses.

Hobbling close to his home, he walked down his street and up his steps to the door. He unlocked it on his first attempt and climbed a flight of stairs into his small apartment.
Scattered were old books he had not read in ages. Looking towards them, realized that he had almost entirely forgotten what any of them were about. The titles seemed an entire other language to him, and their plots, their characters, their words were lost within the worn recesses of his mind. He picked up a dusty, old book. He read the title. *Brave New World*. He could not recall a single scene within the novel. He opened it to its first page, but nothing could re-spark his memory. He dropped the book and looked towards the mantle. His knees were fiery with pain. Every step caused him to wince. A dull pain began to form in his skull. He picked up an old picture frame. It was covered with dust. He wiped off the dust. He moved to a chair and sat down to relieve his knee. He looked at the frame and saw her. He saw them together. *Her face. The park. Summer.* He kept his eyes focused on the memory. *Photographs. A secret cove. The lake.* His head began to radiate with pain. *A laugh. A bird.* His eyes began to water with tears. *Her face.* He forced his mind to remember her. *Remember* As he looked towards the frame, his vision began to blur. *Remember* His palms began to sweat profusely. *Remember* His brain pounded incessantly. *Remember* Blood trickled down the corner of his eye. *Remember* His hands reached towards his pocket — trembling. His eyes were burning with tears and blood.
His hands fumbled once, and then, leaning over to his weakening fingers, he placed his contacts on his eyes.

The world slowed. His body relaxed and his mind silenced its fervor. His eyes were quelled, and he resigned to the warm hum of the digital glow.