

## The Taste of the Sky

“Bet. Light smoke and...sulphurous.”

“Bet. Ozone-y and bleachy.”

“I swear I’m going to punch you if you’ve cheated again.”

“Try me.”

“On 3. 1...2...3-” *Whoosh!* A sweet, pungent zing hits my tongue as the fresh aroma of ozone fills my mask.

“I win!”

“You cheating little liar!” Jokingly, I throw a soft punch on Mei’s arm. Immediately, Mei feigns pains, doubling down with an act that sends me into fits of laughter.

“Help!” Mei cries with an over exaggerated voice. “I’m being attacked! Don’t let me die!” With a chuckle, I reply to her act with an equally boisterous monologue of my own.

“Don’t worry folks. If this lady dies, it’s not because of me; she dies from her own stupidity! What fool would voluntarily take their masks off?”

“Both of us!” Giggling maniacally, we quickly click our masks back on and take a deep breath. As our laughter fades, we stare up at the artificial blue sky around us. The sun glistens bright; the sky of robin-blue is dotted with wisps of white cotton. The virtual world around us is simply the paint that covers the crude canvas of reality.

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It has been a few years since our country of China has distributed these masks. When the Renewable Energy Boom of the early 2010s hit, people rejoiced at the seemingly magic solution for Earth’s survival. However, this cure-all proved hard to achieve. Clean energy was expensive

and time-consuming. Electricity producers complained that clean methods were more costly than the common fossil fuel; governments complained that they were funding a cause that had no improvement. Coal was projected to last us around 150 more years, oil and natural at around 50. *We still have time*, the world cried. With it, government actions began to place less priority on the stark environmental issues. Industry placed their focus back on production over sustainability. Eventually, the movement towards clean energy plateaued.

Although the future could be easily dismissed, the ugly present of the health effects of air pollution could not be. And so, countries around the world began to distribute masks to their citizens. The PureWorld masks perfectly captured the irresponsibility of society: the masks did not just filter the air that we breathe; they filtered the reality we live in. With virtual reality, people around the world could travel back in time to cleaner and greener land. Smells, sounds, sights were altered to create a full, artificial sensory experience for its wearers. Time passed and the world settled back from its frenzy to a peaceful hum as it distanced itself from the consequences of a polluted world.

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“Girls, what are you doing outside?” Mrs. Wang, Mei’s mother calls out. “Hurry up and eat dinner.” Mei and I smile impishly at each other. We know what is coming.

“Bet. Your meal has extra insect protein in it because your mother thinks you’re skinny.”

“Bet. Your meal has extra calcium because you’re short.”

We quickly race back home only to be immediately greeted by the loud, worried voice of Mei’s parents.

“*Aiya*, how many times did I tell you not to stay outside?” *Ah yi* scorns as she hurriedly pushes us into the cleaning portals. The gray smog that smothers our clothes disappears. “The air outside is dirty and bad for you, can’t you see?”

“*Mama*, we were only out there for a few minutes-”

“I don’t even want you to be out there for a few seconds! Remember how you had a cough yesterday and the day before? The news says that 5,000 children have already died this year from this dirty air! What were you thinking-”

“*Mama*,” Mei states calmly as she grabs her hands. “It will be alright.”

Slowly, Mrs. Wang takes a deep breath. However, just as quickly as the nagging stopped, it begins. “*Aiya*, what time is it? Girls, go eat your lunch!” She turns around to the kitchen, her walk brisk as she takes out the meals from the Smart Cooker. “Mei, eat all of your meal today. I ordered the machine to add more protein to it because you’re getting frailer every day.”

“AHA! I win!” I yell loudly, grinning at a sulking Mei.

“It’s not that I don’t want to eat it, it’s just that it hurts my chest to eat it...” Mei grumbles underneath her breath.

As Mei and I begin to dig into our meal, our masks, sensing our activity, switches the virtual reality to our current Netflix obsession. Suddenly, we immerse in an ad that plays before the actual program.

*A shiny jet black PureMask rotates in front of us, glistening in the ambient light. Trendy music blasts in the background as the mask becomes bigger and we step into its abilities. The*

*world around us changes in a fast pace. A blue sky, the crystal clear waters of the coral reefs, the magnificent depths of a jungle. “100% pure. 100% you. The PureMask X.”*

The ad ends; our attention is back to the dining table.

“An upgrade to a new mask would be amazing,” I sigh. “This PureMask 3 is getting old now. Once in a while, my system glitches and the VR and filtration momentarily stop.” I shudder at the memory. “It’s terrifying.”

Mei quietly continues to eat her food. “I don’t know. The corners of my screen have been gone for a couple of months now. My mask was glitching yesterday so I had to stay home. Affording a new one-” Her voice wavers a bit. Quickly, she recovers with a reassuring smirk. “Hey but thanks to the glitches, I get to see how dirty you are most of the time. Eww, you pig.”

I lightly punch Mei on the arm. “Hey!”

“So, let’s continue watching?” Mei looks at me with a mischievous facade that is only identified by her sad eyes.

A deep breath. “Sure.”

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Even though the PureMask mostly succeeded in covering up the ugly realities of the anthropogenic effect on the environment, it could not cover up the socioeconomic stratifications that continued to plague human history. In 2040, human society remained the same. Access to a chance of greater survival in Beijing, China was determined by one's wealth and ability to afford such cures.

There was a reason that thousands of daily premature deaths and three millions annual deaths happened. While the upper class strived with masks with intricate filtration systems,

lower class citizens were stuck with their sad reality of older models that did not have as many means to properly clean out harmful toxins, such as PM2.5s, in the air they breathed. For many, the long-term exposure to such particulates lead to adverse health effects: ischaemic heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), death.

The PureMasks had saved much of the world. But for many, the cold fingers of death still wrapped around their hearts, ready to squeeze at any time.

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Outside, the sky is performing its evening dance. Covered in fire orange silk and lemon ribbons, she swirls her dress of a thousand hues. Fluffy pink cotton balls gracefully trail the edge of her garment as she slows her steps down to a majestic pirouette of magenta. Finally, she ends with an elegant pose, her silhouette mauve. The largest star has set and she gives way to hundreds of others.

“It’s beautiful,” Mei utters softly.

“Do you think we’ll ever be able to see this without a mask?”

A bittersweet silence rests between us. Our thoughts rest on the harsh truth.

“Bet. Slightly bitter and like the taste of a match smoke.”

I look at the frail frame of Mei. Her voice is short and out of breath.

“Bet. Vinegary...and salty.”

As I finish, Mrs. Wang’s shrill voice breaks through the night. “MEI! Come back inside right now. Did you not listen to me-”

Mei smirks at me with her sparkling, but melancholy eyes. “The bet’s still on tomorrow.”

I smile back and wave her off. Mei runs like a delicate sprite into the forest.

When she is gone, I lift off my mask. A small laugh escapes me. "You won today, Mei."

I walk back home, the acrid taste of the sky lingering on my tongue.