

SUPERHUMAN

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Part of

WRITING THE FUTURE

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Inspired by science fiction, entries considered how health and healthcare in the UK will look in the year 2100.

The prize was won by Elizabeth Ingram-Wallace with her story 'Opsnizing Dad', and was published along with the five other shortlisted stories in October 2017.

At a time of reflecting on where healthcare has been, a further set of longlisted stories was published in the summer of 2018 to coincide with the NHS' 70th birthday.

All of the published stories are available on the Kaleidoscope website, along with the option to buy a limited edition hard copy of the six shortlisted stories.

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**The future
is... the
combination
of dreams and
memories**

The air was stale in the old bunker. Water was leaking from a pipe, its regular drip only interrupted by voices from a neighbouring room. His weapon in hand, he was staring at Moira, chewing on his gum noisily to appear more confident. He was trying to make an impression.

— It's become very hard to kill someone nowadays. I remember my Grandpa used to say people were dying all the time before. They would choke on a piece of bread, they'd overdose on drugs, they'd drive cars and crash into each other. People would use a knife and stab other people or shoot them down. They'd live up to 100 and be all proud about it and papers would write about what they ate and how much they slept. I wish I was born at that time. At that time you could get rid of scum easily at least.

He could see she wasn't listening, paused for a second, thinking of ways to get her attention.

— We've been planning to kill him for months, you know. I watched old videos of vampires being killed. Have you seen any? You can try to cut body parts, burn them, take the heart and brain out. None of this would work. None of this would work on him. The bastard has already been cloned. Every organ we damage could be replaced within an hour they say. He's already uploaded himself on a protected cloud and could be programmed into a robot, as if nothing had happened.

He signed the law allowing it last year.

He felt she was listening, albeit distractedly, and continued with a strange, more high-pitch voice.

— I saw a video of him this morning, with his fake smile and shiny tie, did you see it? They say he refused to wear MeLenses at the beginning, when they were first invented. That he was an ambitious politician, hungry for power and votes, saying what he needed to say to be elected. Defending privacy rights, defending humans' autonomy to decide what they see, do and what they know. I wasn't given that choice, the lenses were scanned onto my eyeballs when I was born. I don't know what others before me could see. They probably could see the real world. I can see signals telling me how my vital organs are performing. I receive health recommendations, updates and warnings. I can turn off some of the notifications but some of the basic information will always be there. Like the time I got so drunk in high school and my eyes became red and I couldn't see no more because I wasn't allowed to drink. Not that I can drink anymore, my whiskey's been replaced by a pill that's supposed to have the same taste and feel, but it's not the real thing, it will never be, you get it? They decide how much I can drink, sleep, what I can eat. They decide my brain is overheating and it's time for my mindfulness dose of the day, drugging me to keep me numb. That's why we're killing him. We're killing

him because we've been turned into slaves, where everything is monitored, from how much we've walked, fucked, to whether our shit is healthy enough. And all this data is gathered in their systems, 24/7, accessible to every government and company that can afford it.

Moira was still not reacting, only turning her head from time to time towards the voices as they seemed to be getting closer.

— We're not criminals. We've never killed no one before. We've threatened some people a few times, it's true. We've blackmailed them a bit to give us information about what was being cooked up in the laboratories. We've infiltrated the government, to understand how much more they'll distort our nature. We're not the only ones fighting for that stuff. We just happen to have more balls, to be the ones who believe the end justifies the means. It seems to be the way everything works now.

A rusty door opened and a bulky man appeared, smiling and carrying a large metal stick.

— Don't listen to this idiot Moira. He's too young to make sense, and is ready to say just anything to impress a pretty lady, especially a famous one. Ben is ready to meet you now. I'm going to remove the blindfold when you meet him, but I need to scan you before to make sure you don't have any device that could put us in danger.

— I just cover news stories, I'm not sure what you expect.

Moira stood straight for the scanning. They were using old technology to find sensors, as if it would be able to detect the latest innovations. She could smell something unusual, overpowering and toxic, and wondered if that was tobacco, that addictive substance she had read about, which had been forbidden before she was born.

— We'll need to fry whatever is not blocked by the bunker I'm afraid, that's our condition if you want to meet Ben. No outsider has seen Ben in a long time, so we need to make sure that doesn't change. Follow me. I'll tell you if there are any steps. Might touch you a little bit but only so you don't bump into a wall.

— You're very thorough with the checks. I understand why you guys survived longer than other resistant groups. When did you join them?

The man was directing her along what felt like a never-ending narrow corridor with occasional stairs and a few turns, where he pressed her shoulders towards the right direction.

— A long time ago, when it was just a few of us. My mother had diabetes, the NHS - yeah still existed at the time - didn't have funds allocated to the illness, said it was her fault for eating badly, so they let her die. Were kind enough to cut her feet and

legs, poor woman eventually died of an infection she picked up at the hospital. First generation robots butchered her. They refused to give her the proper fancy antibiotics because we couldn't pay. That was a while ago, and a lot has changed. No more hospitals, only second generation robot surgeons, even in poor neighbourhoods. But in reality things haven't changed, if you don't obey by their rules, getting yourself checked all the time, and following their requirements, they don't have the money to cure you. It's all bullshit, because they sure have the money to inject their new breed of babies with a ton of crap to make sure they have white teeth, mega-brains and toned abs.

Moira hit the wall on her left by mistake. It felt cold and humid, and she thought for a minute she could have a bruise.

— So you've known Ben since the beginning? How is he like?

— You'll see for yourself lady. You're lucky, he read some of your stuff online and mutual friends confirmed you were in with the good side. You know what's happening right? You get your interview but we'll keep you here for 24 hours. We sure trust you, but you're never too careful nowadays. There's a step here. You're pretty strong for a slim figure like this. Let me take of your blindfold off now. Moira, meet Ben, our charismatic leader.

With the blindfold taken off, it took a few seconds for Moira to look around her. She was in a modern room, with a man turning his back, pouring something in a glass and handing it to her. She wasn't sure what she had expected.

— No need for fancy introductions. I believe you were scanned thoroughly, sorry if Charlie's been inappropriate in any way. We have to do all those checks to make sure no one can trace us here. Pharmaceutical companies have put a price on my head, and you can't be too careful.

— Can't be easy being you Ben. I've spent the last ten years covering technological resistance, and no one has gone quite as far as you.

Ben could see her glancing at his arms and neck.

— I wasn't biologically modified at birth, and haven't had surgery; these are arm hairs, most men used to have them up to 30 ago. A reminder of where we come from, that some people prefer not having. As for the scars, they date from when I removed all the devices that had been integrated in my body when I was a child. I'm probably one of the few human beings that has nothing under his skin, no communication device, no drugs receptor, nothing. And yes, the scars look bad but I refused to have reparative skin surgery. I prefer remembering all the stuff they had crammed inside me. I'm a human now, not a perfect one, but real at least.

Moira tried not to stare at his wrinkling face, his yellow teeth, his balding head. She wondered if he knew the number of idealists who started following his lead, who stopped taking vitamins, refused to take reparative injections, not realising they would look like him one day.

— You can't deny that since the System of Health and Ethics has been established, there's been no pandemics, not since the Vern virus in 2077. Do you remember the millions that died within a month?

— Of course I remember, and it's true SHE helped track everyone's health, identifying anyone who could be a risk, anyone who had early symptoms. It's a fine line using AI to monitor our health to avoid a mass pandemic though, and accumulating a shit load of personal data on our lifestyle and who we are, information that will then determine our access to healthcare, jobs, relationships.

She had spotted pills on a table in the corner of the room. She tried to recognise what it was, but couldn't. He wasn't what she expected. Twenty years of resistance, living in abandoned buildings in deserted rural areas had transformed him into a shadow. Or maybe he always looked like this.

— Maybe we should start at the beginning. No one knows your real name, or what you were doing before entering the resistance. There are a lot of rumours that you were the one behind SHE's design, and that's how

you managed to make such impactful attacks. Is any of this true?

— I don't want to ruin any of the myths. I can just tell you that what you see is what you get. I haven't had any surgeries to change my appearance or make me look younger. I wasn't working for the government, or any pharma company at the time, or ever really, but I had people very close to me who spent a lot of their time thinking about healthcare. I worked abroad for a long time when I was younger, that's probably where it all started. We wake up with our machines, eat thinking about nutrition and antioxidants, digest measuring our glycemic index and walk and sleep depending on how much a machine estimates we need to. We think we're being freed because our lifespan is longer and our ageing process stops at 25, but the truth is that we've become slaves. A lot of people think I'm against improvements to our lifestyle, but they don't understand how technology has taken away our humanity. I've been fighting this for decades now; the selection of healthy fetuses and dismissal of any that have the smallest risk of developing illnesses, the aesthetic dictatorship, where men and women can change the way they look with the push of a button, against MeLenses and any integration of robotics into the human body to enhance performance. The latest developments have been the last drop for us. We've extended our lifespan as much as possible by cloning organs, replacing them, sometimes

up to five times within a year to be able to live longer, but we've seen that the human body can't live longer than 150. Even the most advanced technology and wizardry invented has not managed to change that. The decision to allow the transposition of memories onto a cloud after death and integration within a robot has been the last straw. A robot with a person's memory will never be a human. It will look like that person, have their memories, make the same jokes, feel things based on those memories, but it will be AI. Project Superhuman is the death of humanity. It jeopardises everything we are, it's a step too far for us, and that's why we've decided to rely on violence in a way we've never done before.

He looked at Moira, whose face hadn't moved during his monologue. She was young and pretty. He wondered how old she really was, but knew she had to be quite young considering she was an idealist, who got famous by criticising pretty much everything and everyone.

— What do you mean?

— That's the reason I asked you to come here for this interview. You have about a billion people in your network, who listen to you and read whatever you send to them. We're going to kill the Minister and destroy SHE, tonight, at midnight.

Moira's face still hadn't moved, and showed no emotion. He wondered whether that was because

of that new product they had invented that removed facial emotions. He missed seeing smiling lines, girls blushing, rising eyebrows.

— You seem very confident, but you know the Ministry and the systems are more protected than anything else in the country?

— We've developed a new virus, and we've managed to get access to old explosives which couldn't be detected by new technology. It's old but tested. Tomorrow it will all be gone. People will wake up with sunlight, not with a chip in their brains programmed to wake them up after it's been measured they slept enough. They will have to get ready without knowing how many vitamins they need to take, without an assessment of their health or any organ replacement coming up. Those who were applying to that job but couldn't get it because their personal health data was underperforming will be able to work again. We want a new dawn, a new chance to be human.

— What about all those who have already transferred themselves into the cloud? You know that in the past months hundreds of thousands have given up their physical body and are being integrated into a superhuman.

— For us these people are already dead; they committed suicide. You can't just give up your physical

body to move into a robot. You're dead. Maybe there's a machine walking around with your memories but that's not you. Maybe you've saved your sperm and the machine can inject it into another machine with a fake uterus and saved eggs but the kid will be an orphan.

Moira had stood up. She was much taller than him. Her breathing was regular, but she seemed uncertain, looking towards the exit, looking back at him. She put her hand on his forehead, and it felt nice to him, his old skin feeling a soft touch. She had cold hands.

— Ben I'm sorry, you have been a model to so many people, including me in the past. You think you're being ethical but you're just resisting progress, like a lot of people have done before you. You may be right about superhumans, them not being free. I wouldn't do this, but I have no choice. And before Ben could even react, everything became very bright.

In a room miles away, the Minister of Health and Ethics was walking back towards his desk. Three men were standing in the room, looking with an air of horror at the screen on the wall. The explosion scene was being replaced by a painting, Number 5, which wasn't too dissimilar to the video's last sequence.

— And this, is how you we managed to deter the greatest terrorist attack threat we had in years. This was filmed over a year ago, when terrorist Ben

Heckron was planning to bomb our secure facility in North London. He had invited a media critic to cover it, but wasn't aware she had died in a car accident months before, and had already been transformed into a superhuman. You saw how none of their checks was able to sense any AI, or feel or see any difference, although she was a first generation superhuman. Before the explosion went off, she was able to absorb Ben Heckron's memories and he's since been moved into a superhuman, although we have of course slightly altered his penchant for resistance.

He laughed loudly, as the three men were taking notes.

— I appreciate you might think this is not the smoothest way to sell our AI models to you, but our fiercest critic has become one of us. Thanks to his memories we were able to identify all those who have resisted our progress. We've reached a time in evolution where we're able to defy nature and control our fate. A century ago, the main worries were cancer, dementia, obesity in developed economies, starvation and epidemics in developing countries. The idea that earth was too populated and not able to feed everyone was creating panic. We've mastered what was available to us: natural children are still born, and at the age of 25 leave their human body to reach AI. They can still procreate, and the number of superhumans

can continue to increase since they don't need things like food, water or sleep. This is progress gentlemen, and I hope you can see how your respective countries can benefit from using our superhuman models.

About the author

Sasha works in international government affairs and is particularly interested in how policy affects innovation, and how different countries' policies influence each other. Sasha worked in international development, advising governments on their primary healthcare, their privatisation policies and public private partnerships.

Inspiration

The theme of humans being replaced by robots has been a recurrent one, but I wanted to think about it from the perspective of those who resist these technologies, how they will manage to do it in a future where everything is more closely scrutinised.