

To Virus or Not to Virus

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What is it like to live?

Many people ask this question, myself included. People wonder this in different ways, wishing that their life was a little bit like someone else's, hoping for something a little less. . boring, repetitive; and that's something I've yet to find out.

"Hey, mortuus!" How many times do I have to tell them? I don't like to be called that— Maybe if I just ignore them. "Bro, she's not even listening," I hear him joke to his friend. Along with many others, Jert was one of the many idiots in my school who had decided, one random day, to pick on me for the rest of eternity. Mortuus isn't my name at all, it's Vivus. That's who I am. A mortuus is an artificial intelligence that humans decided to mass produce. Now they are walking around among us, doing jobs that we decided we were too important for.

I finally get to the bus, preparing for disaster. It's once every few years that we go on any field trips, yet every time it feels like heck. This year we decided to go to the Art Museum of Elutu. Classmates converse around me, sitting together, living their lives. A driver mortuus starts the bus, and we're off. The teacher begins to talk about the rules and expectations, but none of us are listening, we are either blasting music in our ears or chatting with others. In due time the ride was over.

"Please stay in pairs, or groups, and feel free to explore. We are meeting at the entrance again in one hour, so set a timer or alarm if need be," the teacher tells us, setting a reminder for himself. Everybody immediately pulls out their phones, which are as thin as a piece of paper, and do the same. The paintings are displayed with a holographic light, imitating the individual brush strokes from the original piece. Walking around I soon find myself disappearing deeper into the museum and away from my classmates. The holographic paintings are soon replaced with physical ones, which all catch my interest. There is a difference, seeing the pieces right here. I could run my hand over them and feel each stroke the artist made, adding more and more layers onto what already was. Then here I was, standing in front of a self-portrait, made by some guy called 'Vincent Van Gogh'. If people didn't have cameras or phones back then, how could you do a portrait of yourself so easily? Mirrors would work, I guess, but the way that the painter had portrayed himself seemed to be as if he had painted someone else, who had sat in front of him as he worked.

"Miss." I jump, alerted by the sound of another person. "Miss, the museum is closing." Two security mortuus' appeared behind me, and they seemed as if they were looking at me in concern.

"What time is it?" I ask. The museum couldn't be closing. If it was, that'd mean that my bus along with my classmates had already gone, and that'd be insane! Their faces flash and their features are soon replaced by a digital clock.

"6 o'clock," they reply in unison. My face fell as soon as they spoke. "What is your name?"

"Vivus," I replied. Had they not checked to see if they had all of the students, how could they have left me? This must've been Jert or someone, I swear—

"Vivus is not in the database. Is that perhaps a nickname?" One of the mortuus' ask in a robotic tone. Why would I not be in the database. . . that didn't make sense. All humans are supposed to be logged so that they can track where we are supposed to be at all times.

"Uh, it's not a nickname." The mortuus' look at each other and tilt their heads in unison as if confused, and grab onto each of my arms. "Hey!" I struggle against them, but their grip on me never wavers.

"It is in our protocol to take you to the museum director if we are unsure what to do with you. Please do not resist," they say, pulling me through hallways and to an office door.

Without looking up, a disgruntled middle-aged man speaks. "What is it?" he asks.

"Sir, this entity was found walking around the museum without a known reason." One mortuus says.

"Dude, I was here for a field trip. Can you tell them to let me go?" I plead, struggling against the metal restraints I found myself in. The director finally looks up from his work and observes the situation.

"I'll have to ensure that you're human, first." He rustles in his drawers, pulling out a few papers and clearing his throat. "Okay, what are the digits of pi?" Weird question, but okay I guess.

"3.141592, etc." As soon as I answer, he scribbles something onto the paper.

"When is your birthday?"

"Unsure, but I've been told it is the fifth of October."

"Why are you unsure?" He asks.

"Because I don't have any fam— well, it's private information."

"Final question; who was your first crush?" Dude, are you kidding me, what type of question is that?

"I've never had one." Afterward, he seems to calculate my answers, writing stuff in the margins of the paper.

"Okay, it says here that you're a mortuus, so. . .you'll have to be taken to the mortuus shop." Wait—

"Bro, are you serious?! I'm human, why don't you believe me?" He shrugs.

"It's just what the test says."

"And you believe it?!"

"Well, yes. It was tested and proven to be true. Maybe you need to be repaired, something must be wrong with your wiring. Or you have incredibly advanced AI. . . that'd be wild. But everything will be fixed at the shop." He chuckles a bit to himself as I am brought out of the room, dumbfounded and worried. What in the world just happened?

This was insane— Just because of a few questions, I am now sitting in this glass box on display. I tried so many times to leave my restraints, but all they did was send electricity through my body, causing me to go limp. This wasn't fair! Anything I tried to say, the employees wouldn't listen, they were so focused on their idea of a "normal human being", that they ignored the fact that people can be different. Now here I am, being freaking sold.

I sit down in my box, leaning against the wall frustrated and annoyed as people walk by on the street. Some time passes, and I notice a girl and her father walk into the store. I watch the daughter as she studies each mortuus, her chocolate hair drifting gently as she shifts between each one. Finally, she comes to my box and without looking into my eyes too long, decides on her choice. She takes her father to the front desk and exchanges her digital card. They then walk up to my box again, and the shopkeeper puts in a code on the glass which shimmers into a keypad of sorts.

"This mortuus is very defective *or* is just highly intelligent and acts impulsively, so be wary of that," the shopkeeper warns as I step out of the box. This honestly just all feels like a nightmare, or a dream if I'm being honest— maybe I'll wake up from the shouts of the other orphans, and this will all be over. This can't be real.

"Alright, mortuus, I need to give you a name, so..." The girl who had, "*got*" me, had pulled me into her room where I would stay. I need to tell her that I'm not a freaking mortuus, like this is crazy. "How does Dawn sound?"

"I mean I already have a name, but sure. You can call me whatever." I mutter, feeling almost helpless.

"You do? Well, what is it?" she asks, her eyes giving me a sense of curiosity. I just find myself scrambling for words, my vocal cords not wanting to work, no— the *weren't* working.

"I- uh. . .it's Vivus. Yup." As I speak the girl circles me, studying my features more attentively.

"You are really well made. . .you almost seem too human. All I know is that you're supposed to serve me and whatnot, but honestly I just need someone to talk to— but yeah."

"Well see that's the thing; I am human." I chuckle, wondering if she's just gonna believe what the shopkeeper said and not listen to me, like everyone else. She looks at me with a puzzled look.

"Really?" Her eyes dart from each of my eyes to the other, looking for truth somewhere deeper than the surface. For a second she seems to believe me, but then chuckles to herself. "No, someone this perfect can't be human, at least in this century." She. . .she thought I—

"Uh, but uh what should I, what's your name?"

"Sinthia." She smiled, her face lighting up as if a child would making a new friend. "Okay well I have homework I need to do, so maybe you could help? I've never had a mortuus before, so I don't know how I'm *supposed* to talk to you— but uh, well yeah." She chuckles awkwardly as she heads over to her desk.

I find myself helping her for as long as possible, starting to grow use to my situation. We chat late into the night, talking about random bands and artists and what our favorite things are, and soon enough I'm living this new life, not really caring and just enjoying the time I'm spending with this new friend of mine. Days go by, and I grow into a sort of rhythm. She wakes up, I make her breakfast as she packs her bag, she leaves for school and I do my own thing in her house, then she gets back and we just hangout till late. I find myself forgetting all about how this happened and what my life was like before; all I know now is that I have Sinthia in my life. Living with her in a sense, I start to notice the little things about her. The way she stirs her tea back and forth, drawing little figures in it. The way her eyes glaze over when she listens to her favorite songs, and the way she makes sure every little thing in her room is in its place. If she found even a speck of dust on her lamp, she'd pick it up gently and carry it to the trash instead of simply dusting it off.

"Vivus," I turn to face her, sitting at the desk working on a new piece of minuscule furniture. "You're not actually a real person, are you?"

I almost forgot that they all thought I was an AI, I had gotten so used to this life...

"No yeah, I'm real," I say as she stands up and walks over to me sitting on the bed, looking at me with her eyes full of. . .hurt, sadness. "You don't believe me, do you?"

She grabs my hand, looking down at it with a sense of longing. I study her face, trying to figure out what's wrong and why she won't understand.

"I mean, I guess it would be weird if some stranger was sold to me— and stayed in my room." She chuckles, tears starting to form in her eyes. "I just have never had someone like this.."

She thinks I'm not real, that *this* isn't real. But it is, I care about her so much; the late nights we spent just talking, the trips to the store and back, the laughter over stupid drama from her school— I've made a closer friend in four weeks than I have my *whole life*, and I feel like that's saying something. I pull her hand up to my chest, resting it on my heart. Maybe if she feels my heartbeat. . .she'll understand? She looks up into my eyes, and the sadness is replaced with confusion and wonder.

"Sinthia, I am human, like you." She leans back, laughing as I say this.

"Really?!" After I nod in reply, she just hugs me, pushing us onto the bed in unified happiness. I look at her, watching her eyes. How come I never noticed that they were hazel, they look so pretty— She sits up suddenly, out of the embrace. "W- wait, so you are human, so why were you in the mortuus shop? Wait so you were telling the truth when I first got you and I was just too blindsighted to believe?! I'm so sorry, I put you through this." I see so many anxieties flash upon her face, stressed about what crazy situation I am in. I just chuckle, giving her hand a tight squeeze before pulling it away.

"You did nothing, it's just insane what happened. I think because our world is just so normalized with artificial intelligence, we will believe that anything is fake. Like this happened all because the stupid 'Are you human?' test was wrong. People just have a weird stereotype for a normal person, that they are too blindsighted when someone doesn't fit in with it!" I look back to find her watching me with all her attention, and I feel my stomach start to do flips, unsure of what to do with this. "Uh— so, so yeah, I'm here now." I give an awkward chuckle.

"Your parents must be worried. . .we should probably get you back, we need to do *something*," she says, her words tainted with love and care.

"Well that's the thing, I don't. I don't have any parents, so yeah. The only thing I'm missing is school, and I don't really care for it anyway."

"Oh, I understand that, in a way. Still, you can't be classified as a mortuus forever, we *do* have to do something about this." She stands up from the bed, pulling me with her.

"But, what?"

"Maybe we could change the test somehow? We could contact the Mortuus Facility, and maybe make a complaint or something?"

"I guess. . .but that's just gonna set them back a little, then they're just gonna keep making these things. I honestly think we just need to get rid of them for good, people survived without this type of technology for so long. I wanna do something more than just making a small complaint." I was bullied for so long because of the way I act, all because I don't display my emotions the way I'm *supposed to*. It was ridiculous, I needed to do something, Sinthia was right.

"Maybe we could go on the radio, or play our voices over the city. We can at least let others know about the problem, it's up to them to fix it," she suggests. I nod; it is a good idea. We can't do everything on our own, whatever that might be, but at least we can do a little bit.

"So how do we do that, exactly?"

"My aunt runs the morning announcements, we could go to her workplace maybe?" I nod again, fully set in this plan. It should do something, and if it doesn't, at least we can know that we tried. Plus now I have a friend, so life's not so bad now.

We stand in front of the recording studio's dashboard, unsure of what button does what. There are so many sliders, and so many dials; it'd take a tech whiz to figure out how to operate this thing! Yet here we are. We start looking through the buttons, and soon enough, we find a red button displaying the word "live". I immediately sit in the chair pull on the headphones, and situate the microphone. I can't help but notice the nerves I'm feeling, I have no clue what I'm gonna say— Maybe something about me getting mixed up in the system, or. . .or about the mortuus' being useless, that they're just making us lazy? A touch of a hand on my shoulder seems to make the thoughts dissipate, and I look up to see Sinthia.

"Just speak your truth, like what you told me earlier. What are your opinions on all this?"

I press the button.

There's a faint click, a pause of hesitation, and then I speak.

"Hello, city of Elutu. My name is Vivus. You might not know me, you honestly probably don't," I chuckle. "But that's not the point. I am here speaking to you today, due to this problem." I glance at Sinthia, anxious to continue. She gives me a reassuring nod and thumbs up. It makes my heart flutter a bit, but I focus on what's at hand. "I was given this test to see whether or not I was an artificial intelligence. Yet somehow, it said I wasn't human. Which is wrong, so very very wrong. I think, I honestly think that we have grown so used to the fact that artificial intelligence lives

among us, that we will believe that anyone is inhuman just because of a few differences. Yes, I can't display my emotions correctly, but that's something I need to figure out, not a quote-on-quote *fact* that says I'm a freaking robot! What I'm trying to say, is; we need to embrace our differences. Just because you might look different from someone, act different than someone, or *feel different* than someone, that shouldn't mean that you don't try to be kind and show them at least a little bit of respect. We've come all this way, from the beginning of the earth, and we will continue to the end. We have created so much out of destruction and pain, we have created music and art, movies, buildings, and technology— we should be proud of who we are. But, it's hard when you can't live as yourself."

Sighing, I stop the recording. The story ends.