

2250 words

I had long realized that being a teenager born in 2031 gives me full of privileges. I live in a world where we have virtual reality worlds, artificial intelligence, personal flying vehicles, self-driving cars, quantum computers and full-body tissue engineering. This is not to mention the space hotels in low earth orbit which even the average middle class citizen can afford to spend a few days. It was even cheaper than flying to Fiji sometimes. The first fully underwater city off the coast of the United Arab Emirates has also just been built last year. We, China, and Russia all have permanent settlements on the moon though a trip there was still beyond the price tag of most folks. We don't have a presence on Mars yet but we do have an advance research base. I do feel that this is a wondrous time to be alive.

Today, though, my body has been situated uncomfortably in one spot since it was my high school graduation ceremony. Another four hours until it is over. Our school principal was giving a long motivational speech on how he was so proud of every single one of us and how beautiful our futures would be. These typically trite words had no effect on most of the students but the parents were glued to his figure.

I couldn't understand why the school board decided that this year they would choose the authentic graduation experience. This is probably a fad like the real books rage a few years ago that the school board wanted to adopt. That faded quickly when the administrators realized that books cost quite a lot more than PDF files online and VR web portals. Hopefully, the "authentic" graduation ceremony goes away by the time my little brother graduates. They decided that instead of the usual virtual reality (VR) graduation ceremony where everyone just straps on their goggles from the comfort of their air-conditioned home like most school districts would do, all the two thousand students at my school need to be physically present on one of the hottest days in record. I was half-asleep with these thoughts when a waving hand appeared in front of my eyes.

"Houston to Shenana," the voice belonging to the hand said. "Do you copy?"

“Loud and clear,” I said in a loud whisper. “Serenity Station here.”

Serenity Station was the first human science base established on Mars back in 2040. The first batch of astronauts have left but the next batch should arrive in two months or so. If I am lucky, by the time I graduate from college, I can join Space X or Blue Origin to train as a private astronaut. They are taking candidates fresh out of school these days unless the government.

My best friend Claire sat next to me and like I, we both love space exploration and technology. Her parents sat in the row behind us and were carefully listening to our principal. My parents unfortunately had to sit further away. They had arrived late due to the terrible traffic coming here. Being recently laid off from their professor positions at the university was tough for them, especially since they helped develop the robots which replaced them both as lecturers. Their research in deep neural networks was no longer considered important since artificial intelligence (AI) has advanced beyond its capabilities. The school hired a Nobel Prize winner who planned to work on the next gen AI that would use a combination of fuzzy logic and quantum mind theory. Whether this would bear fruit to true artificial consciousness remained to be seen. Underneath it all, I find it a sad irony that my parents have become obsolete just like their research. With a new house just bought, we had no money to buy a personal flying vehicle (PFV). I did not envy their two hours sitting in a self-driving car.

“Are you paying attention to his speech?” Claire asked.

“A little but I dozed off when our principal has droned on about the bright prospects of our future for the last hour now sprinkled with trite phrases from Steve Jobs to Qiaoxi Ren,” I said.

“Well, they’re very inspirational. The inventors of the personal computer and the personal robot should be mentioned in every graduation speech,” Claire said with all seriousness.

I sighed. I respected these forerunners of our modern technology as well but I could do with a little less bombastic fluff in a speech and more technological substance. For instance, the development of

the Ren algorithm which allowed machines to learn from other machines and generate multiple versions of themselves to learn from was critical. He did not mention that at all.

I looked at Claire again and realized that I still did not understand her fascination with technology. She appeared to be quite the Luddite. Case one was her wireframe glasses (that had no VR capability by the way) which her grandparents had given her as a family heirloom before they passed away. I am sure it had a lot of sentimental value to her but that did not mean she needed to wear it every day. She had LASIK done five years ago and so I know she really doesn't need glasses. I wore glasses as well but mine was VR enabled like 99% of teenagers these days. Back in the day, my parents had told me teenagers were hooked on smart phones. They had chuckled then and said VR glasses had replaced them. I had a smart phone but rarely used it except to make calls.

Her avatar at our school's VR school platform Edu World wasn't much better. According to a government regulation passed in the early years of massive virtual reality adoption, all avatars (representations of ourselves in virtual reality) need to look like our actual selves. In other words, I couldn't make myself look like Marilyn Monroe since I looked nothing like her. That didn't stop us from tweaking our noses and eyes to make ourselves more beautiful. I have a flat nose and made it an inch higher for my avatar. I also made my eyes a little rounder and larger. Claire didn't bother doing any of that. She thought that was lying to yourself and her virtual counterpart looked exactly like her. In a sense, I agreed with her but that meant she was willing to be a target for the bullies at school. Virtual reality protected you from being really hurt with our online classes at our virtual classrooms but our school did have actual buildings for school events. At a play in sixth grade, she was pushed to the ground by one especially obnoxious girl. That happened to be how we met in sixth grade where I taught the girl a lesson.

"I have heard their live speeches on YouTube more than a dozen times," I sighed. "Besides, don't you feel the sun? I feel like I'm in a furnace."

"It is not that bad," she was clearly lying as she grimaced and squinted her brows.

“Can you believe it though? We’re finally graduating!” I exclaimed.

“I know. It has been a grueling five years. What are you planning to study in college?” she asked me.

“I am not sure yet. Probably aerospace engineering and planetary geology. I hear those are the backgrounds that space companies are looking for in explorers to Mars and Europa.”

“Wow, I just plan to stay on Earth and build the machines to fly you over there,” Claire said. “MIT with a degree in robotics engineering should work.”

“A traditional brick and mortar school? This is one of those times I am not sure I envy you. Isn’t the tuition cost over \$100,000 a year?” I was a little surprised. Few people could afford real physical schools these days and since the government approved virtual schools as having the same academic credentials, there were more reasons than ever to not go to one.

“My parents said they will cover half of the tuition and my scholarship covers another half. I think I will be fine. I’ll probably need to get a part-time job to cover my living expenses though.”

“Still doesn’t seem worth it. You know you can get the same education if not better at HiTech University.”

“I personally don’t fancy a VR school. I like having real books and real teachers,” Claire said defensively.

I was going to point out that most universities don’t use books these days and some of the school libraries which didn’t bother updating their computers have closed down precisely because of that. Her teachers would also likely be personal robots which was a no different experience than an AI at a VR university except that you have to suffer the stifling atmosphere of a packed lecture hall. My parents were one clear example of the perception that robots made better teachers. I kept silent my thoughts. This is

one of those few topics that Claire would passionately defend to her death. Higher education in the traditional sense was close to her heart.

“Oh, they are starting to call names! Not long now until we can leave,” Claire said excitedly.

We quieted down and watched as our classmates went up one by one to collect their diplomas. I fidgeted and waited impatiently for my name to be called. A short while later, my name was called. I looked up and saw that it was my turn. The assistant principal held a fancy 3D printed shape memory alloy (SMA) diploma on stage with my name engraved on it. There was also a 3D model of my face taken from a senior portrait. My school was one of the wealthiest in the district and had decided to jump on the latest fad of 3D printed diplomas. I looked terrible and had asked for a retake but the school said no.

Photographers who specialized in 3D printed models were expensive and the school weren't going to make an exception for me. That doesn't bother me a great deal since I plan to heat up the 3D SMA diploma over a hot stove after I get home. The composite material was sensitive to temperature and with enough heat the present figure which was my face would transform into a 3D logo of our school. As long as no one would put the thing in the fridge for ten minutes, my face would remain hidden and the school logo would remain.

“Looks like it's time for me to go up and collect my tacky prize,” I said to Claire.

She gave me a thumbs up and clapped like everyone else. I looked back as I walked towards the stage. My parents were beaming. I tried my best to give them a good smile and then walked the remaining half dozen steps to the stage.

“Congratulations, Shenana Chen,” the assistant principal said as he shook my hand and handed me the awful looking diploma. He was a thin tall man with a neat cropped white hair that was starting to thin. Somehow, even in the blistering heat he wasn't sweating much. He looked like the polar opposite of our portly Principal James who kept wiping his brow from sweat. I snickered at the sight and the principal

misinterpreted that as a smile. He shook my hands as well and said the same words that he had repeated fifty times already.

I sat back down and Claire gave me a hug to congratulate me. We sat down and waited impatiently for her name to be called. After an interminable amount of time to reach the last name starting with letter W, we finally heard Claire Wang from the booming mic. We smiled at each other. She went up and was genuinely happy to collect her diploma. She arrived on stage and I took a careful look at her picture. Unlike every other moment in her life, she really spent a lot of time with makeup on the day of our senior photos. She looked beautiful in the senior picture and that showed on her diploma.

When Claire sat back down, I gave her a hug. We both congratulated each other. We sat through the rest of the ceremony in comfortable silence. There was no one with a last name starting with Z except for a Zhang so this didn't take too long. After the last name was called, the principal said a few farewell words and wished us luck. By this point, everyone noticed that he was drenched in sweat and I'm sure he was starting to stink since some of the front row folks were wrinkly their nose. This meant he only said a few lines and ended the ceremony.

We hurriedly rose up from our chairs and walked to meet our parents. Both Claire's and mine were beaming. They were proud and though I despised the ceremony, I had to admit that I was proud of myself too. My high school was grueling with ten subject courses every semester and I was proud to have gotten an A on all of them except European History. I was a little sad that Claire and I would be going to different schools but that was a thought I quickly dismissed from my mind. Though I would be attending a VR college, I do plan to move out of my parents' house and live on my own. Another chapter of my life was soon to begin!