

Children of Technology

By Samantha Wilkins

It was a pirate ship with a plank hovering over bloodthirsty sharks. A tidal wave on a vast, wide ocean. An island with monkeys bickering in the trees and an anaconda always slithering behind the next tree. Simply, it was a backyard with a small, rusting swing set, two towering oaks, and a baby blue spruce that, over the years, I would watch grow. Those were the only tools I needed to create brand new, limitless worlds. I could be on a mission for hours on end to find an elusive, rare species or become a castaway whose ship was thrown off course in a storm. Yet, all I remember is what those nostalgic moments tell me, and I can't even truly explain those, as I look out the hospital window onto the carefully manicured, unused park I've stared at monotonously for the last five days.

There are countless days like today when my memory is thrown into a strange, muddled stream of thoughts that feel so foreign yet familiar at the same time, and all I can do is try to forget and sleep my memories away. I've tried to tell myself this shouldn't be difficult, considering the fact that I spend my days lying in my fluffy, white bed with my thousand thread-count sheets. But my mind just strays from sleep. I find myself peering into a past I don't recognize because of the quick, foggy flips of images. They used to call this A.D.D., but they have decided there's no need to diagnose something everyone has.

Nothing can hold my attention long enough to tame the sporadic flashes. I have already flown right through every book in the library room down the hall. The seemingly stimulating articles brought in to feed my knowledge are always finished an hour after their delivery. All I do is wait. And think. And question. That last one especially. I question if what I'm doing is right. Even if I decided that the answer was no—that this was wrong, unnatural and strange—could I do anything? Could I put a stop to it? Should I?

Then there is the creeping wonder of why I'm thinking about this to begin with. People don't think like this anymore; it's unnecessary. They tell us it's right, and so it must be right. But another flash happens, and I am tossed from thoughts all over again.

I haven't told the doctors or nurses about the flashes. As is, the plan for the future of my fetus is a rigorous schedule filled with lines of script and knowledge. If I were to be deemed unsuitable for parenthood, I would never witness my fetus's growth. Even if it doesn't happen the ideal way I'd like it to, I want to watch along the way. I want to see her live out the rigid schedule that is identical to each of the others in the surrounding rooms.

Yesterday, during the twenty minutes I'm allotted daily to get out of my bed and exercise, I went on a stroll to the seventh-floor nursery. That's where the newborns learn to talk.

Staring through the plate-glass window, I see the colorful incubators with holographic images dancing across the ceiling. My fetus is due to join these infants in only a short four weeks. She will be kept in the incubator for the remaining month of gestation. This has been the standard practice of delivery for the past two decades.

A memory interrupts. It must be nearly forty-five years ago; I'm sitting in my high school biology class watching a gruesome video of some bloody, ancient portrayal of what I can only presume to be a natural birth. This memory is one of the clearest I've had in a while and I can only guess it's because I'm in a hospital, even if it looks nothing like that prehistoric one from the video.

For her, the hospital served merely to help with a few hard pushes in the final stage of the process. Life today is interwoven with hospitals, routine in every facet of living.

The woman's screams are still ringing in my mind when the beeping begins, telling me I have five minutes to get back to my room. As I make my way, slowly waddling down the hall, passing the infants and their personalized educational screens that flip through the alphabet with phonetic pronunciations spelled out in vibrant colors, I continue thinking about the memory. The familiarity of something so alien catches me off guard. It's almost like I desire to know the memory—and that feeling—better.

I try to shake it off once I reach my room. They'll be checking on me soon, and my mind needs to be cleared of the past. With the knowledge quotas what they are this year, I should have had all of these outdated memories wiped from my brain, just as they "recommend" for optimum life performance. However, unlike the others around me, I can't find the will to completely part with them, so I have continued the struggle to remember brief snippets. Hazy as they are, I appreciate them. I believe that the freedom and imagination depicted in those pieces of the past are still the root of what I want. No one agrees that those values are building blocks to a real life anymore, though. I see everywhere that the old concepts of childhood have perished. I feel sadness tied to that loss, yet here I am, furthering that loss in my own womb.

When Des and I first decided that we wanted to expand our family of two, we had to begin the licensing process just like everyone else. Des was like a little kid on Christmas when he saw the variety of gadgets and gizmos geared toward improving the process and selection of desired embryos. Health exam after health exam, IQ and psychological tests, and the mandated home education upgrades led us to this point. Des intends to come see me every morning and then again after work for the duration of my bed rest in the hospital. Thus far, each time he strides in with that smile on his face, saying it will be worth it. Each time he leaves with that smile seeming just slightly dimmer. I can only deduce that this is caused by the stilted answers nurses give to his once enthusiastic questions. He is fascinated by every bit of technology I'm hooked up to and probes for the purposes of each wire. Do we know the hair color yet? Will it be curly like mine? Can we find out the risk of cancer in 50 years? Any other news? Des simply wants to know every little thing about our child. OUR child. However, everyone else knows more about the path for our child's life than we do. Isn't that wrong? Unnatural? I know Des could be thinking these very same things, but you can't just go around discussing alternative ideas like that nowadays.

Like me, Des had a childhood in the truest meaning of the word. When those memories weren't on the list to be self-monitored in our quest for optimum knowledge capacity, we would share stories of neighborhood play and make-believe games. As a child you could be anything. I always played the wild, adventurous woman, while Des, on the other side of town, was forever on a treasure hunt. Our discussions of simple, happy days creating our own magic were always so charming and light. There were no severe attitudes and expressions and no calculated responses. The last time we talked like that was before we decided to have the baby.

I once believed that when we finally had the baby, and got away from the gadgets and gizmos in the preliminary check ups, we could escape into a backyard with our child and introduce her to the magic a blue spruce could hold. Before presenting our case for the pregnancy, Des and I would stay awake, imagining all the exciting things we would teach our child about in a spectacular backyard and, more importantly, everything she could learn by wandering and creating for herself. I can't believe it's

been nearly a decade since we first envisioned those scenes together. Those dreams seem so vivid, as if Des and I thought them up last night.

But I continue to lie here, as stagnant as the progress toward those dreams. This is anything but what we wanted. I knew the process for selecting appropriate, viable embryos was law and we'd go through it because we didn't want to stir up trouble. It didn't stop there like we thought it would, though. In the beginning when we applied, all that was available were just the supplements and regimented reading to the fetus. Then, advancement after advancement led to plans to insert a microchip to begin teaching language in the womb. Furthermore, they started extracting fetuses a month early so that they can develop in a programmed incubator that would supply even more language education. It was federally promoted and subsidized and everyone was signing on, so we did too. Anything designed to help our child to blossom.

Equipped hospitals were rare at the time and waiting lists were long, so there goes a quarter of my life waiting for a child, which puts me at a ripe 58. I know by today's standards that is not too old—in my twenties and thirties I thought the opportunity to have children late was great—but now that I'm here I doubt some of the decisions that got me here.

In the time spent waiting to be ready and then jumping through hoops, the process of creating a new life isn't the only thing that's changed. Schools adapted to electronic teaching systems. Our home was modified to place the educational screens in every room; I vaguely remember calling them "TVs" sometime in my past. Because all children now begin aptitude testing so young, the first priming years are spent with literature and those screens.

What does it amount to in the end? Des and I wanted the life we grew up with for our child. It seemed likely—possible enough—to achieve. But now there are all these pressures pushing us down a path that we should supposedly want. It's ideal to have the best. That's what humans are built to strive for, after all. So they say. Explain to me, then, why there is a nagging hesitation in my throat every time I sign yet another form allowing artificial stimuli into the womb or instructing the personalized incubator to be built to trigger my baby's predispositions based on her genome. Explain to me why I can't forego the distant memories of my childhood for the sake of my child's chances for perfection. Explain my impulse to do something to change it all.

No one has the answers anymore. No one knows where it began. The destruction of a culture of childhood so subtly disguised under pretenses of improvements is untraceable. While I cannot trace it back and find the person who changed it for all of us, I can forge a new path. I can make a choice to leave technology and artifice behind, in exchange for the desires of having a baby. How to break away back to that now, though? Have I not ridden the wave of catastrophic development for the past decade, thinking it wasn't out of control? I fed the fire and let it venture this far into my life, which I cannot blame on anyone else.

As she walks into my room, I see in plain sight in the nurse's hand a paper form—no doubt asking my permission to poke and prod some more. My stomach knots as I give it a once-over. They've found that the baby has the potential for weak muscle mass in the right arm. Amputation and replacement is advised. The accompanying brochure details what sounds like a commonplace procedure. I swallow hard and sign. I have my reservations, but I can always change tomorrow. What's one more arm before I do?