

## **Light of the Word: The Line X Readathon Competition**

### **Winning Piece by Janis Ho (7F)**

It was dark inside the coffin. Gears aligned; a slow ticking triggered the beat of life for what lay dormant within. One after another, a network of cogs created the steady drumming of interlocking mechanical workings. Then came a light. A bright red light illuminated the ominous realm of pitch black, and the conscience of a being was reawakened.

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A hand, one adorned with gears and embellished with clocks reached upwards into the abyss to push against its confinement. It was the cold exterior of precious lacquered wood that encased the arousing soul. Whistling steam escaped from a thin crevice as determination became the pinnacle of its strength. The lid shuddered and finally, a click as it creaked open. Upon its long-awaited unfastening, ghostly cobwebs, like lace to accompany a gown, were torn down and ancient stale air from within the coffin wafted away to mingle with a fresher breeze.

Cautiously, a hulking figure arose from within the coffin, ribbons of metal grating against each other to create a harmony of clunking gear. Minimal amber light revealed splotches of corroded metal here and there across its entire body and a ticking clock embedded in its chest.

Where... am I...?

The foreign machine shook its bedecked head from left to right, generating a strident grinding noise as it surveyed the unfamiliar terrain. Dumpsters against a graffitied wall. A stained eraser on the drab asphalt floor. Stale sheets of water accompanied by the pungent whiff of rotting garbage that was just a trifle odious.

...How did I end up here?

Among the many peculiar treasures that often find themselves abandoned in a gloomy alleyway, a wind-up child's toy tucked beside a dusty coffin was certainly uncanny. The perpetual being stood frozen as it stared. Something about its rigged shape and the intimate rusting metal along the edges was soundly familiar. Then, the monotonous tempo of gears in the working fell flat to a string of incidents rushing back like a cascading waterfall.

The world was an endless tunnel of pitch black, a despairing labyrinth with ultimately no end. In a sudden heartbeat, the echo of a raspy voice banished the darkness and perception replaced misery. A panorama of the new world. It could distinguish a faint pattering sounding beyond what it could define as exquisite walls of cogs in every size, exposed pipes running down the russet wooden walls. And then, rested wearily on an armchair, an old man in his dotage dressed in a golden suit looked fondly at his creation through a pair of circular glasses.

"As close as perfection gets."

Then a second memory unfolded.

Gears and gadgets galore, the conscientious humanoid sat adjacent to his creator as they developed another contraption. Resplendent golden beams of light dappled the surface before it like a blooming dandelion. Pencils scratched the dozens of pages that lay scattered on the desk, balancing the ceaseless grinding of innumerable cogs. Joy. Exhilaration. Pure felicity. The machine detected itself revelling in delight on cloud nine. This, right there and then, was the

feeling they called 'happy'. The old man abruptly clutched at his heart and almost weakly coughed a long, wheezy cough. His deep blue eyes, glazed like sapphire agates, wandered to a distant world visible to him and solely to him. And for the last time in his life, the old man stared at his masterpiece, the epitome of remorse and affection.

"Until we meet again, my beloved."

Their collective hearts were synchronised for those final fleeting moments of euphoria. That was its last memory, cherished inside of its clockwork heart. Perhaps the man simply had to run an errand, yet the truth was left untold before everything succumbed to the darkness.

Standing motionless in the alleyway, the machine cast its vision towards the twinkling night sky, starfruits against a pitch veil. Alas, it had resorted to the ludicrous age-old question asked by all of mankind since the beginning of time, 'what if', and a thousand possibilities unravelled in its artificial mind. What if the old man had returned from his trip to discover that his treasured creation had gone? No. It could not, would not let him come home to an empty cottage.

Until we meet again.

Between passages of the past and the present, his passions and words had not faltered and continued to stick to the android. How absolutely anomalous for a machine to feel a strange, lonely emptiness – a vacant hole that no gear of any shape nor size can fix, not even with the dexterity of an adept, callused hand. And so, it was in that moment of silence that it pledged the whole of its fidelity to seek what was lost eons ago and ultimately, repudiated the reality that laid so patently in front of it for the fickle concept of death, it did not know.

There once was a mechanical being who embarked on a resolute journey to return to its creator. But awoken into the same world that left it behind, it may have to wait another eternity.