

# Writing assignment

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It was still dark outside when he stepped out the glass plane of his garden on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor. He looked down on the streets that started lighting up from the commuting electric capsule that were taking their passengers to work. Everything looked so organized and peaceful down there, a constant flow of lights, no sound, no disruption. He could hear the humming noise of the motors up to his apartment.

Back some decades ago, there were still traffic lights for the drivers to organize traffic and prevent car accidents. In those times, people were honking their horns, sometimes even shouting at each other. "How exciting", he thought "that must have been a great time to live in. Now, everything works automated, nobody needs to talk to each other anymore. No need to ask for the way or complaining about some idiot cutting my lane. It just doesn't happen". He took a last breath of the outside air before going back inside where the air-conditioning system had been scenting the air with his preferred "flower fields" perfume that he had bought a few days ago. Just another cup of diamond-purified water from the 1-for-all drink machine and then out the door. Alex had to get to work, he was already 61 seconds behind schedule.

The elevator took him down to the street level where his capsule had been waiting for a minute by now. Gerome, Alex' boss was paying attention that everybody arrived on time for work. "Effective work from 0800 to 12 and from 1330 to 1800" says the well-defined employee rulebook. One and a half hours' lunch break, including a small nap in the relaxation room to revitalize brain and motivation. Alex loved that little nap after lunch; afterwards he felt much fresher to go and hunt the afternoon sales goals that were deciding on his paycheck.

While his capsule was fading into the stream of other commuters' capsules, making their way through the forest of high-rise buildings in downtown Frankfurt, Alex started to check his mails. The capsules own scheduling service presented the plan for the day on the capsules window screens; he needed this structure to be able to focus on his tasks. Timely-delivered work packages are the goal to his success, he believed. It was so quiet in the capsule that one could focus solely on the pre-work exercises so that everything was ready at 0800 to reach out to customers to sell the latest developments that Alex company had brought to the market. He was a specialist sales man for personal duty drones that fly loads from one place to another, check upon kids making it to school on time and picking up medicine from the doctors practice. These drones would even hold a rain umbrella above one's head in case someone really had to go out in the rain. But that almost never happened.

When he arrived at work, his boss showed through the typical expression on his face that Alex was exactly 49 seconds late, the capsules simply cannot make up time. His desk was the same as he had left it yesterday, clean, hygienically clean. Everybody could have replaced him the next day without a problem and without possibly knowing Alex had been there the day before. The sun had gone up by now, shedding its' light on the city. Alex was sitting directly by the window and could enjoy the sun going up and shining in his face every one of these beautiful winter mornings. What an extra motivation to start the day. The word "winter" was

something, people still said to the time when the sun goes up later than in the summer and it got a bit colder during that time. He had heard that back in the day, people actually had snow and ice during this time. Nowadays people had to travel far up north if they wanted to see some snow. Alex did not care. Just there was no rain, then everything was fine for him. The only thing he hated about the winter time was that the trees first turned gray and then lost all their leaves which then had to be picked up by the road robots. It looked a bit ugly he felt. Especially, because his city Frankfurt, was actually called a “green city”. This was a concept people introduced a long time ago, to resist the climate change and to bring back “quality of life” back to the big, dark, and dusty cities. “Green they might be. And it looks nice”, he thought, “but only in the summer. But, oh well”. He sighed slightly, starting his computer and feeling the warm sun rays in his face.

Back 50 years ago, long before Alex was born, the concept of “green cities” was hyped quite a bit. They were introducing new technologies to the cities, to make them more energy efficient, clean, connected, and pleasant to live in. They succeeded well, as governments poured lots of money into cities and corporations, to do everything in order to stop climate change. Reducing energy consumption and CO2 emissions, promoting electric cars, solar panels everywhere, personal wind turbines, green roofs, to reduce the heat island effect, and ground water cooled ventilation systems. The List was long. They could speed down the development and actually fixed the average temperature to a degree that Alex could not remember, but they eventually stopped it, he knew. Too late of course. The north pole ice caps had melted, countries were flooded and people had to relocate. Researchers actually had found a way to build up that polar ice again, cooling the vast area down with a mix of technologies and refreezing the ocean water. By that people hoped to regain some of that area that had been lost to the sea over the decades. However, Russia and other countries had found the last drops of oil on the planet down where the ice used to be. Now, they did not let anyone get near to the north pole, having secured the area with battle ships. No way for the world to get in and try to reverse the process that had brought so much pain to a lot of people in the world.

“So there is just no way” Alex said to himself, closing his eyes and reaching for the button to unroll the sun blinds. His boss had deactivated the automated system for the blinds, so actually the employees could decide themselves when to roll the blinds up and down. It always felt weird for Alex, because he was not allowed to control many other things himself. He was just there to work and sell. He guessed his boss also liked to enjoy the sun from his office once in a while, that’s why the system was disabled. While the blinds unrolled, Alex took a last glimpse at the city from above and the skyscrapers around him. “What a beautiful city they actually have made out of it. Nice parks, nice zero-energy houses, plants inside the buildings. I like, I like. But what’s it actually worth? Hahaha, don’t know...” Alex had always wondered about all these neat places in the city, so clean, so well-organized. And yet, nobody there to enjoy them. Everybody has to work all day, six days a week with at least one job to make a living. The old people who had been happy to enjoy of the fruits of their work careers, as parks or open spaces have been put into robot-driven elderly homes where they have to wait until they die. Condition-based autumn life management it was called. Old people have to start taking tests at the age of 75, while still in their jobs. If certain indicators show up to be red, they will find themselves in elderly homes soon after. Insurances simply did not want to pay for old people anymore and tried to minimize the risk of having to pay for hospital stays, the robot automated homes were much cheaper.

Contemplating all this negative-seeming stuff, Alex actually started to focus on his work, it was already 08:02:54. Three minutes late. Not acceptable if you want to make the morning sales goals. And Alex wanted to. He had to.

The morning went as it usual. Alex made his goals, as almost always. The three minutes extra would have earned him some extra money, but he knew he would be back tomorrow. Alex loved the job of calling customers selling them his products with his charm and arguments. It was a new selling strategy that had evolved during the past years and actually created many new jobs. People had become so used to visual advertisements everywhere that they actually got tired of them and their degree of effectiveness had dropped to almost zero over the years. Actually calling people with real voices, real arguments and some nice words to lighten up the day had brought sales back up. Other services included video calls with good looking sales ladies and men that were presenting the products and were interacting with the customers directly. But Alex had his personal reasons to be in the phone department, "at least I don't have to shave every day and can sleep five minutes longer every second day". The bonuses were about the same anyway, therefore Alex had become a telephone drone sales specialist.

In the break, after the quick lunch, Alex went to the relaxation room to revitalize for the afternoon sales goals. On his way, he passed by one of the good looking girls from the video department; he put his eyes down and was a bit embarrassed, as normal. His palms got sweaty, but as soon as the situation was over, he relaxed again. He liked the phone department, where he normally did not get to see his customers, so he could hide behind his phone. Alex has no girlfriend, dating pages were not his thing, too much focus on work and success. Alex had realized that he actually would not know what to say else to a girl, if it was not for trying to sell a drone. Then, he sees all the beautiful girls on the screens everywhere and gets depressed sometimes. He had hoped beautiful girlfriends come with the success and a nice place to live, but he was still waiting. He knew how to communicate on the phone and had talked to many of them, but only selling drones. Lying down in the cabin to relax for the afternoon, he today, more than normal, got really upset with himself about not being able to talk properly to a girl that he just met on the hallway. "She probably has a boyfriend anyway; I don't stand the slightest chance".

After the break, everything went well. Alex reached his afternoon goals for the 15<sup>th</sup> time in a row. He cleaned his desk, and was on his way out the door. When he passed foyer, where colleagues were meeting for an evening small talk, he could see his colleague Jeff sitting quietly on a bench. His head covered by his hands, he looked sad. Alex went to him to find out what the problem was. Jeff was a good employee. Very intelligent, maybe even more than Alex. Jeff looked up and Alex could see his slightly watery eyes. Jeff had just overheard a conversation on the hall way. From next week, he had to lead a sales robot training group, training the robots to sell the drones on the phone. There were to learn using and copy his very own way of talking, arguments and charm to influence the customers. Alex realized, this would also affect him. Soon, all salesmen, yet again, would be replaced. This time by sales robots that were able to sound and behave just like normal people. He had heard about their existence before, but on the phone, nobody ever knew whom they were really talking to, as they were just as intelligent was human, reacting to emotions, making jokes, and so on.

Alex at first did not know how to feel about it. But when sitting in his capsule, he could feel the devastation deep in his bones. He knew, within months, maybe weeks, he would have to find another job. His CV was good, he had a good reputation in sales and his bonuses were speaking for themselves. Actually, he could not imagine not getting a job somewhere else, but what if the new company would also soon introduce the robots? He would have to change again. He would be “running the gauntlet” as his dad used to say.

Alex arrived home, but instead of going up to his apartment, he felt the need to take a walk through the parks that surrounded his building. He had never really done that before. He strolled through the empty park that was lit up with small LED lights everywhere in the ground now that the sun had gone down at it was almost dark. Looking left and right, he saw nobody, really. Single couples here and there, taking an evening stroll, but the way it had been during his childhood, he could not remember having seen that during the past years. Back then, people were hanging out in the parks, enjoying nature and the company of each other. Today everybody seemed so focused on themselves, in their “own bubble” as he called it. Everyone would go home, would order personalized food, watch the videos they would want to watch. Everything was just personalized. No need to fight over the choice of dinner, no need to go to the movies to enjoy and movie together. Everyone did what he or she exactly want to do. It was the same in the parks. Obviously, people rather spend their time doing what they want to do and not caring so much about others company anymore to hang out in the parks or go to a street café. Life was happening inside now. If not in the corporation buildings where people had to work hard and efficiently, then at home, trying to relax and be ready to perform well again the next day.

After having circled around the artificial pond that was put in the center of three high rise zero-emission houses, Alex started to feel tired and he still had to go to the gym. He was used to work out in the gym and run on the machines there, but walking around a park, alone, in the evening, that was new. He went home to get his sports bag and then head for the gym for two hours before going to sleep to get ready for the next day.

When he came in the door and dropped his work bag near the table in front of the mirror, his eyes caught the little picture that showed his parents, 20 years ago together with him, on a beach in northern Germany. After their careers, Alex parents had understood the way, the world was going and had sold what they had and left for an elderly home, located on the many islands on Småland, Sweden, what they called their paradise. They had invited him several times and even tried to call him, but he wasn't interested. He had to make is own future and did not want to be reminded on what he might look like 40 years ahead. As many other couples in their time, they had gotten a single child at the age of 45. “Småland in Sweden, that's like the end of the world”, he thought. Sometimes, he was a bit honest to himself, knowing that he was afraid of getting old, having worked the entire life and then being transported to a robot-based elderly home, once his performance at work dropped significantly.

The week went on and signs were rising that robots would soon be integrated into his office. First, as “colleagues”, then replacing the humans. On Saturday evening, Alex decided to leave the city for a day. He had heard that people some kilometers out the city were still living like “in the old days”, on farms, making their own living in their small communities. Alex ordered a capsule, put his finger on the map of the screen somewhere where it was green and clicked on GO. He turned off the screens in the capsule to actually be able to see what was going on

outside. After some time, he could see the high buildings passing by, arriving in a place where there was nothing but fields and trees, he even saw some animals on the fields. He had forgotten what they were called, but he was sure to have seen them before. He was passing by small towns and communities, old farm houses. The streets were getting dirty from the mud. He opened one of the windows and could smell a totally different scent in the air than he was used to. Out here, there were still traffic lights, for the manually driven vehicles. The capsule stopped at a light, and suddenly, a girl came up to him and asked for the way to the next supermarket. Alex got confused. Of course he did not know. Without paying much attention to the really pretty girl that was standing outside his capsule, he found here the information and told her where to go. "Thank you" said the girl and smiled, "see you around" and winked at him. Alex was totally frozen. He didn't know what to say, he smiled back and the capsule went on. "What was that? What did just happen? Why did this girl talk to me without any problem, so naturally?" The capsule drove through the fields and Alex started thinking.

He realized that he was living exactly in the world, people had imagined 50 years ago. Autonomous cars, sustainable energy concepts, efficiency through and through. However, they had missed out on a crucial point, the people. Predetermining their everyday lives by even planning the most efficient route through the city park, nobody was challenges anymore to go his or her own ways. No conflicts of interests, no disruption, not even crossing the parks marked walkways. Everything was going as planned, in specified processes. No real communication between people; how even to meet them, what to talk about?

Then, the contrast the rural areas, people there being responsible for themselves, driving their own "cars", with smelly and noisy engines. Mud on the streets, and food with dark spots on it and actual flavor. Smiling people who do not possess diamond water purifiers or scented air conditioners, but can smell the scents of nature – for good and bad.

Contemplating about this, he realized he had not seen his parents in 15 years. "Småland in Sweden, might not be such a bad place after all. Should be time to pay them a visit soon", he decided. "And those pancakes my mom made when I was ten years old ... have never tasted anything like them ever since...".