The Cave

3/7/21 --I should go ahead and tell a short story about a dystopian kind of thing where everyone lives in a private matrix reality, so they’re not linked at all. I’d have ot come up with the right set up, it’s a fairly simple idea, but just exploring the way in which it might go down that people drift into private dreams, and then the story of how one person might wake up, or how it might happen for all the isolated people to come together into a common dream, and what might happen from that, maybe if it were a situation where people come together to try a common dream, and then drift back into private dreams, and it goes like that ceaselessly like a tide.

Implicit in this whole virtual vs. real discussion is obviously that there’s an underappreciated merit to the real, and implicit in my idea is the idea that the benefit of reality is that it imposes upon you things that everyone must accept in common, and these common things actually connect us, and have a gravity of meaning that is missing from a virtual space that puts all control in the user’s hands.

So many of these things are very commonplace ideas at this point, but I think there’s a way to deliver on the nuance, and of course it all comes down to the specifics, making a character in a certain kind of situation which is compelling and relatable.

So, the general structure in narrative would be finding a character in a situation that is very nice and ideal and like a perfect dream, according to their own personality. But they’d have to be invaded by something unpleasant, an intrusion fomr the outside world.

See, this is why we need to define the history. Do people not know that they’re asleep in their own dream? Or do they know? It’d be interesting if people fully knew they were in a private dream, like this was a choice, but I wonder if they dreamt long enough if they would forget all that? And then what’s it like to be abruptly woken up? And what happens to a human psyche that gets to live in its own lucid dream forever? I’ve definitely had plenty of dreams that make me feel like I never want to wake up, but much like dying we have no choice about waking up, normally. So it’d be interesting to have a situation where people fell asleep one day and never woke up. Would they remember all of it? And would it all be entirely lucid? If it was a dream, of course all this stuff would be happening that made no sense and it wouldn’t matter, because it’d just keep going and going, I guess what makes it interesting is when the nightmares come, or contents of your dream become scary because its parts of your psyche you don’t know how to deal with. So there has to be an element of lucidity, where the person knows, or everyone becomes trained as a lucid dreamer so they can always direct what’s happening, and it’s probably this vascillating cycle of intense control, and with increased pleasure and satisfaction, people tend to drift away, until at some point they end up drifting into nasty nightmares and things they don’t like to remember, and at that point their lucid dreaming instincts kick in and they exercise their power to change reality.

SO you’d follow someone in their dream life as it vascilates between their pleasures and falling into fears and how they exercise their impulse to control reality to just keep floating along, and they’ve been doing this for maybe decades. Of course a key to this is the fact that their human bodies still need nutrition and to be preserved. Similar to the matrix, they’d need pods to stimulate their muscles and keep from withering up.

SO what’s making this different from the matrix? First off, they’re private dreams, they’re not in a common internet reality. The whole thing is based on solipsism, as this reaction against the realities of connection, if anything the dream is similar to the conservative American dream of radical and rugged individualism. And it got this way because everyone got sick of the internet, so it wasn’t like the computers coaxed people into sleep, it’s more like this is what most people wanted and drifted into. And did everyone do it? There’s questions here, obviously, because I’m trying to define a single possible future, so we have to make some choices about a certain chain of events, and think about the implications of those decisions. I think the important nuggets for me in this one is simply “Everyone escaping and getting lost in private dreams, and re-confronting common reality after a long vacation.”

One of aspects that seems necessary to this is that reality does have to be a pile of shit, of course mainly because people abandoned it. But we also need to see clearly what we’ve been missing since we’ve been in our own dreams. This is an age old question, one I still deal with, and why it’s relevant to me. We believe implicitly that it’s an objective value, that there *is* an objective value to knowing the truth. That we should always choose a truth that is not preferable to a preferable lie. But why? That should be the challenge of this story. We always assume the truth we dislike is better than the lie we prefer, why? Even right now I have trouble articulating an argument why you should. I find myself just saying, “Because it’s the truth. THe truth is inherently good, even if it’s not to our liking personally-- and here perhaps is the key. The truth is *BIGGER* than you. That without the truth, we would live in the small box of our own minds, and not see how big everything really is, and that there are other like us, but different, and in this world with us. ANd that when we lie to ourselves, we refuse to connect, and we are small.

A-ha! So there is something here, a moral that’s not an empty platitude, something that actually makes sense when you see it. THe truth we dislike is important because once we accept it, we actually become so much bigger.

So the story would follow someone lost in their dream, being forced awake into shitty reality, and it being this real question, why the fuck pick truth over reality, really? And then it has to be made clear that truth is bigger than you, and that’s why it’s important. Cool. I can outline this further at a later date.

4/20/21 -- So the story starts off with a 15 year old girl named Renee. She’s living in a beautiful cabin in the woods, with animal friends and quiet hikes, living a perfect day on repeat pretty much. But she gets pulled out. Does someone come into her world to pull her out? I think she has ot be jarring pulled awake. This brings up questions about how the whole thign operates. Because we’re imagining a version of VR that’s not that far off. The experience is detailed enough that with any invasive surgery, you can place this little device on you temple, close your eyes, and then it basically beams all the fake virtual reality using your own brain chemistry, so that VR is as convincing as any dream or real life. There is a whole online world and community and it’s obviously becoming hugely popular, and we have to establish a version of events and their consequences, but we’re still early on in this process. THe real world is still very much active, still very much a shit show, potentially even worse as we deal with power struggles, dwindling resources, climate disasters, and so on. So naturally lots of people have been going online, and all of this is still subjected to free-market, unregulated shenanigans, because there’s not a clear moral consensus on what to do about the VR situation. But we’ll pick all this up in context. The reality for Renee is she is a traumatized young woman, I had thought on the edge of graduating high school, and even though she’s from a rich family, well-protected, and she’s been told she can do anything she wants in this world, she still sees all of the terrible, horrible awful things; she still knows her family’s wealth is happening at the expense of the world. She still knows her father has been raping her. Is that necessary? Maybe it’s a little extra. Maybe it’s enough to be aware of this confluence of her family’s wealth, the state of hte world, the general lack of happiness and of course her family would have the resources for the most cuttign edge VR. and where does her family stand on the whole debate? Perhaps they’re even invested in it? If they’re shamelessly invested in it because they know it’s the way things are going, they probably also might be part of the camp that see it as a good thing, an opportunity for world leaders to take care of a lot of these problems without people using all these resources. It’s the kind of big-picture thinkin rich people are inclined to, because it reduces individuals to data points and averages. So they probably have a good line of thought about wanting to roll out more and more of this VR stuff, and setting up these clinics, where people can choose to live most of their lives in VR, and in this way reduce their footprint, and it gets branded as this mental health therapeutic centre.

At the same time, all the people against all this wil fall along many different lines. There will even be other members of the business community who don’t want everyone going to sleep because they then lose their consumers. There’s gotta be a huge lobby, made up of all the people who’s wealth and assets depend on consumption, trying to fight the VR lobby. And her name is Abby, like a holy sacred place. If Abby’s family belongs to the VR lobby, it’s because they obviously know it’s a cash cow, the way of the future, but they also have convinced themselves VR will save the planet. They probably think of themselves as good, progressive parents and progressive people who care aout climate change and creating a better world for their children. So they think it could e a great thing to create all of these centers that are providing a mental health service. Of course people can oviously privately own their VR, but considering all of the issues with people going catatonic, not waking up, dying in VR because they never unplug, and there’s obviously a huge backlash among many people to treat it as a dangerous and addictive narcotic that needs to be made illegal.

It’s the same way with cellphones, where there’s a strong argument that cellphones are bad bad bad for our health, but they’ve become so engrained in the fabric of society there’s no way we could make them illegal. It would be the same thign with VR, where there’s too much demand, too much money and economy there, to make it illegal. Civil liberties hawks will go in defense of everyone’s right ot live whatever kidn of life they want, and there will be many arguments from futurists aout how it’s superior, and all we nede to figure out is how to no longer need our biological bodies, and the people who generally see it as a net benefit, and of course this new argument about how it might actually save the planet to be having half the population reduce their use of resources by at least 75%, and it’ll allow those who stay active in the analog world to work together to change things which were impossible to change when the systems of the world had to e operating 24/7 at max capacity, and we’re not quite at that elevel yet. The real world is very much as it is now, but there is a growing epidemic of people going catatonic, and Abby is one of these people,

And so what this is, is a story about a family dealing with addiction. Abby is horribly depressed, for very good reasons. She sees the horror in the world. And her experiences of life have made her associate being connected to others as something painful. The family dynamic has to make it clear why Abby doesn’t feel safe in connections with other people, why she will slide into a solipsistic reality. Perhaps it’s as simple as the fact that the parents are technically separated, but still raising the kids together, the kind of things that suck but we take for granted as part of reality. Nothing we’d call intolerable, but enough for someone who grew up in a world halfway real and halfway digital, to finally just be able to fall into the hole of perfect control, especially when real life in a rich family that’s not very happy.

So Abby’s in a fantasy coma. SHe gets pulled out of it, violently, and she’s in the hospital. They catch her right at the beginning of it. It’s the kind of thing where this is the first time it’s happened to her, they’re shaking her awake, and they rush her to the hospital, and they have to give her something that forces her awake out of the coma, so she wasn’t out long, but probably a full 24 hours.

How does it work if you do this while you’re awake, how does sleep happen, where does the borderline exist? That’s probably why they have safety recommendations that you only do it for a few hours at a time and you should e fully awake, and this becomes part of the problem, is people will do it so long that they fall asleep seemlessly into a dream and their body doesn’t know that it’s awake, and that’s how people start drifting into endless dreams.

SO they wake her up, they probably want to take VR away from her. She’s awake, alive, dealing with things.

THe parents are probably now in a moral crisis because they were on the side of making lots of money on VR, are they suddenly questioning whether VR is really worthwhile?

And when they talk to their daughter, and try to get her help, how does that go?

The father probably makes a hypocritical argument about the merits of objective reality, the one that I and many people would make,

And that’s when she snaps back with all the perfectly valid points, things theoretically he agrees with as someone who’s investing in a company building living arrangements for people to basically sleep the rest of their bodily lives away in VR to save the planet. BUt of course when it’s his daughter it’s not so easy. And he can’t deny that the situation in the world is precarious. He could make the argument that there’s a way to make the world a better place with the VR, but that’s the point, to make *this* world better, because there’s something about it VR will never be better at.

But what do they decide to do? Because if she’s depressed, and convinced enough that she’ll threaten suicide, then the parents have no choice to go let her fall asleep in one of these VR homes, and they can go visit her, but there will be something very sad for the parents the whole time.

So there’s an arc here:

1. Abby in her dream
2. Abby waking up in the hospital
3. Going home with parents, the shitty reality
4. The parent’s bad relationship, their mutual investment in VR, their questioning of it.
5. A conversation: Reality is better, stay with it! (is it?)
6. The threat of suicide, the decision to want to go into these virtual homes. What other choice is there?
7. Admitting their daughter to a fantasy life, the parents terribly sad.

An interesting thought: I’m framing this now in a negative light. Or rather, there are more positive versions of this story where people who are fully into the VR world could have no mental health problems, and we shouldn’t assume that only people with mental issues woudl want to live in VR. In fact, that’s probably the point we want to make with Abby. She’s actually a normal kid for her world and society. She’s as normal as her circumstances could make sense of. Being a rich well protected kid in a world that’s only been getting worse and grimmer, growing up also with constant access to other realities that has only increased with time, how could you call that an unhealthy reaction? She doesn’t have a mental issue at all, she’s the perfect product of the world she was brought up into. This is will be a very understandable progression. We will obviously still insist on the importance of reality, I will know it for myself. But in this speculation,we won’t pretend we can definitively preach to people that real life is better than any dream, even if I believe this to be true for myself.

I think I do want to keep some element of hope in the real world though, because my argument is based on saying there’s value in living in a world that’s much bigger than you. That’s going to be hard to demonstrate with this bigger world being such a clusterfuck. I think it’ll have to come back to these parents, quasi hip buddhists, who have to learn to accept the world they created for their daughter, and harsh realities, and still be able to see the value of real life, even if they couldn’t give it to their daughter.

4/22/21

This is the story of a young woman living in a beautiful private fantasy, being pulled out of it violently, back into the world of NY 2030. We see her with her family dealing with the fallout and recovery from a coma, and how the family deals with it, especially being wealthy investors in the very technology their daughter is now abusing, and the family themselves questioning their position on the technology.

The larger circumstance: VR has become more and more pronounced over the decade, reaching a similar status as phone in terms of their penetration into the fabric of society. Much of the saem activity that used to happen on phones now also happens on VR. Over the decade though, there’s also a huge increase in people who’ve gone catatonic, especially as a new technology breakthrough has been made where the VR interfaces directly with your prefrontal cortex, which has taken the comatose cases off the charts, and the world is in the middle of a war over what to do about it. A lot of big financial people are freaking out because they’re losing consumers and laborers. Populations are tanking. BAsically, people think its a good thing, they think its a bad thing, and the only thing that’s clear is that the world continues to be a mess. There’s also an emerging argument for encouraging the comatose. Creating and opening centers around the world that allow people to sleep as long as they want, demanding little resources to sustain their bodies, muscle stimulations to keep the body from atrophying, and the ability to come and go as people please. It’s like a nwe living situation that resembles a mausoleum. But people are calling it therapeutic, a defense for civil lierties, and even good for the planet, though of course its controversial mostly to conservatives and republicans who think it will destroy the economy.

Once we get the full scope of the world and the debate around this epidemic of people leaving the real world, the father who’s a large investor in these new homes has to talk to his daughter and make the case for objective reality and its value. She has to counter back with a strong argument.

And the father and mother will ultimately let her move into one of these places, especially since she’s threatening suicide if they don’t let her, and it ends on a note of great sadness. Also, i’ve decided it should be two dads, gay parents, she’s adopted.

At what point do I jump into the writing? Really whenever I want, the more my head is geared up for it. I might attend to some other tasks, do lunch and meeting w/ Tom, then write. I’ve got the next hour and a half, maybe just start going with part 1? Better than not doing it at all.

4/25/21

The young girl ran her hand through a brook, and the water was as warm as her hand, soothing in the way it almost felt like nothing.

The redwood forest stretched around her, soaked in early morning light. The forest was quiet, but for a few birds that chirped, and she whistled back. She whistled up, then whistled down quickly, meaning “come say hello!” And a finch swooped down to a mossy rock right next to her.

Then she whistled again, offered a finger, and the finch flew to her finger, and with her other finger, still holding a few drops from the brook, the finch accepted the droplets in its beak, and then the young girl stroked the feathers on its head. The finch flew away after a few minutes, and the girl picked herself up to continue her journey.

There was a path through the forest that lead to a beach. As she walked along it, she touched the trees that were ancient and thriving, and she savored the fresh air. She noticed different living things, each unique plant, the mushrooms and the moss, the ants and the dragonflies, and she greeted each one in turn. This was her walk through town, where she knew all the locals, and she started to hum the song from Beauty and the Beast: “Bon jour! Bon Jour, Bon Jour, Bon Jour!” She didn’t sing loudly, wanting to preserve the quiet, but even her gentle humming bounced up into the canopy and was greeted by a few chirps in response.

She finally saw the ocean, the sheer drop off that lead down to the sandy beach, empty and quiet but for the rolling and crashing waves. Noon sunlight high above made the ocean sparkle. She felt every grain of sand massage the soles of her feet, just warm and not yet hot. The sun as well, unclouded, bathed her without being harsh or anywhere close to burning her skin.

First, she liked to sit at the shoreline, and just be, and watch the waves, and be hypnotized. Then, without premeditating over a period of time, she would pull off her light, white cotton dress, and jump into the ocean, also pleasant to the touch, warm like at the end of summer, but still enlivening, so that her heart pumped and her pulse danced as she floated and stretched on the rolling waves, dove and saw through the world beneath the waves, like through a green glass bottle, and the salt didn’t burn her eyes. She swam submerged for minutes, then ascended and drew the briny air into her lungs.

As the sun was a handwidth over the ocean, everything pink and gold, she swam for the shore, let the same breeze dry her smooth skin, then carried her dress with her back into the forest. The setting sun turned the canopy purple.

WIth the last bit of sunlight trailing the sleepy, lavender forest, she made it back to her cabin, where a glowing fire was already going through her stained glass windows. She closed the door, and her tabby cat, Tabitha, her australian shepherd, Klaus, and her axolotl, Judy, all watched her enter and greeted her as they customarily did. The cabin was filled with aroma: lavender, rosemary and thyme. As the last light disappeared outside, the dancing fire in the hearth made it so she was never cold for even a second. SHe made tea, ate blueberry biscuits, fed her friends, and cozied up with a book of Keats poetry, which she never finished because before she knew it, she was asleep, and dreamlessly, she woke to the dawn, and her friends all stretched and yawned as she did.

She was cold. Shivering. THe goosebumps on her skin made her feel like a plucked goose, an angel stripped of their feathers. THere was a dampness, even in the wood, that had never been there before. THe floor was cold, and so she dug through her dresser to find all of her thickest clothes. As she shuffled around to feed and care for her friends, she found she was sweating through her clothes, and tried to imagine how she might’ve caught a fever? SO she stripped off her clothes again, and drew a bath, just hot enough that she could step in easily and submerged in comfort. But as she sat there, her body was racked with shivering, as if weak, and her head felt filled with fluid, and her cat Tabitha looked at her, and said, “Who’s got Narcan?”

And the girl woke up in a damp sweat, the hospital gown starchy, itchy, and clinging to her skin, her heart beating too fast, two gloved and masked people holding her down, and two other familiar faces. The girl screamed like a newborn who didn’t have words, and barely knew howto use her own body. Then they put a mask with a tube over her face and nose, and the air made it too hard for her to panic, and while she didn’t sleep again, the consciousness remained fuzzy enough for her to observe the scene from a distance.

A hand held her damp, stringy hair, caressed her cheek, and the voice said, “It’s okay, now. You’re back, you’re home, you’re safe.”

“We’d like to keep her overnight, to do some CAT scans.”

Hori Gunndrson ran a hand through his hair, and Uma remained stoic with her arms crossed while Dr. Hernan made his request. Their seventeen year old daughter, Sophia, had just been revived after a thirty hour coma in which her vital signs were dipping until they were turning into flatlines, requiring emergency action they waited until the last moment to deploy.

Hori intervened Dr. Hernan’s explanation: “you’re afraid she’s got brain damage?”

“I don’t know anything about the effects of this for sure. Some common threads have started to emerge from people recovering from a VR coma, but there’s also lots of variation. We need as much testing as possible, both for her and for all the other kids like her falling to this.”

“Let’s schedule it for the future.” Uma commanded and did not ask. Hori turned to her.

“What do you mean? We want answers straight away, don’t we?”

“Sophie needs to rest at home. She’s been living a dream, and it won’t help her want to stay awake if we keep making it unpleasant for her.”

Hori saw the sense unquestionably and was happy her mind was sharper than his right now. He turned to Dr. Hernan. “She’s right. Assuming she’s lucid and stable, how soon before we can bring her home?”

“She could be lucid in less than an hour. If we can run a few basic tests to make sure things are basically in order, then she could leave in two or three hours.”

“In time for sunrise,” Hori rubbed his sagging eyes, saw the deep circles in Uma’s.

Dr. Hernan bit his lip, drew a breath and spoke his omen.

“I’ll just say it for the record, I absolutely hear you wanting Sophie to have a comforting re-entry to reality, but it’s against my medical advice. It’s a risk. She’s part of the beginning of a health crisis on par with Opioids, and I anticipate much worse. These Temples have been on the market barely over a year, the long term effects of these comas on the brain aren’t well understood yet. Relapse rate remains high, as well as suicide rates. I don’t mean to be grim or fear mongering, I just want you to know what we’re dealing with these days.”

“We know perfectly well what we’re dealing with,” Uma said, making for the door to Sophie’s room. “We put Temple on the market.”

Sophie drank an apple juice box through a plastic straw, and it tasted mostly like water, sugar, and the aluminum lining of of the box. Perhaps she imagined the aluminum flavor, but it didn’t matter because she was told she *must* drink the whole thing to help her blood sugar levels.

Her parents were both typing away on their own tablets, wearing the goggles that presented whatever they were looking at in front of them, like a layer of data on top of reality. This had been how life had been since Sophie was child. Whenever her parents had decided: now was time to be together, and engage in an activity, they made a point of all staying entirely offline and disengaged. What that meant though, especially for incredibly busy, rich, tech dependant people, is that when those activities reached their completion, all other times were spent engaged in virtual business. Especially “waiting times” like this one.

Sophie was asked to not engage with any screens, and to practice mindfulness. Paying attention to her body, and her breath, her own thoughts, and no hospital drugs that would affect her state of mind, not even prozac. In this moment, she observed herself staring at her parents with a lump of hatred in her chest, and thoughts about how she hated them, how they did this to her.

The nurse came in, and he told them they were ready to release her, and proceeded to start pulling her IV drip, inviting her to slowly start activating her body, and see if she could get out of bed.

Hori and Uma pulled up their glasses, put down their pads, and hopped into action as if they were the most attentive parents. They went to Sophie’s side to help her pull herself out of bed, and she shooed them away, accepting only the nurse who got her on her feet, and confirmed she felt steady. Uma pulled a bag of Sophie’s clothes and offered to help her change, which Sophie declined and asked for privacy to change, until Hori informed her, solemnly, that she couldn’t be left alone at the moment. The nurse and Hori left the room to let Uma be with her while their daughter put on her fresh clothes.

They spent the car ride back in an initial silence. Coasting up the highway, looking out the window while the car drove them. After a period, Hori asked, “Sophie, you want to have some pesto pasta when we get home?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well, that’s not going to last forever, so?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Now that the gates were somewhat open, Uma said:

“You don’t have to talk right now, we know you’ve had a hard time. But we’re going to need to talk soon.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You know we’re not mad at you?” Hori chimed in, looking to Sophie.

“I know.”

“We’ll figure this out. You want to listen to any music?”

“Whatever you want.”

Hori inhaled through his nose.

“Is there anything we can do for you right now?” Uma asked with patience.

“Just quiet.”

“Okay.”

They arrived back at the house, greeted by security. When they walked through the door, Sophie made quickly for her room, and asked if she could have dinner in bed, which her parents would not refuse her. Nor did they need to wrry about what she would do alone in her room: of course her room had a camera to monitor her, one that had once successfully allowed them to find her choking on food and give Hori the time to dash into her room and help remove the food stuck in her windpipe. Sophie was used to being watched, her life being not private to her parents, and for many years, it ceased to matter, because her parents barely ever looked at it, and forgot it was there.

Sophie had no need to do anything indiscrete in physical space. All she needed to do was sit in her bed, on her phone, and later that, on her VR headset, and in the last few months, she looked to be sleeping most of the time she wasn’t at school, except for the faint, waxing and waning, pale blue glow of the Temples: the size of a googly-eye, that were places on either side of the user’s temples, hence the name, and streamed the massive amounts of data necessary to directly interface with someone’s prefrontal cortex in a non-invasive way.

Sophie had been one of the early guinea pigs, inadvertently. When Hori and Uma first showed her the prototype, she was immediately intrigued. THeir family had never been technophobic in the slightest, particularly because they were so close to every step of its development. While other parents worried about cell-phone use rotting their children’s brains and creating addictive personalities, and a lack of coping skills with the world, the Gunnddrson’s fully embraced what they saw as the inevitable tide of the future, a party that, the earlier you showed up for, the more fo a chance you had to benefit from what would come.

As soon as Sophie ran up into her room, Uma and Hori were accosted with messages from board members and other friends in the company checking in. They sat in their real living room with their goggles, simultaneously in a virtual room with twelve other college, and both also had another corner of their hub dedicated to the live feed of Sophie’s room, where she seemed to browsing her bookshelf for something to read, something they took as a great relief.

“I think it goes without saying, but your opinions onhow we move forward are going to have the most weight in this discussion.” This was from Caleb, The CEO of Temple, the one who’d drawn up the blueprints and made the enthusiastic pitch four years ago and had become probably their closest collaborator.

“Appreciated,” Uma said, “but you don’t need to baby us. Whatever choices we make with and about our own family should have no bearing on the direction of the company.”

Hori said nothing, though he was supposed to at that moment echo his agreement, but allowed his silence to count as consent for the moment. The other talking heads nodded, and the conversation shifted to a report by the CFO.

“I’m happy to say the direction is only up. I don’t know if you two have considered this yet, ut in the spirit of not patronizing you, i’ll be frank about some near realities to deal with: the press will most likely find out about your daughter, and this will add fuel to the fire of the Red Pill crowd. We should also expect to see some market volatility over the next few days, when they use this to plug the epidemic rhetoric again. However, reporting over the last 6 months show only the kindof of gradual trend that every other major platform saw in the last decade: we expect it to age up, slowly ut surely, and as more economic transactions take place *De facto*, there’s no slowing this train down.”

Here Caleb jumped in again. “And, as I see it now, we need to figure out our position. We can do nothing, and everyone will keep making money, more people will jump to our platform, governments will mainly stay quiet as long as they get to buy into it.” Everyone waited for him to say more. “Uma, Hori. I don’t meant to put you on the spot, and while I understand if you dont’ want to answer, I think it’s important we all know: how *do* you think we should move forward?”

Because the goggles captured every twitch of their eyes and broadcasted it into the virtual meeting, there was no way for Hori and Uma to communicate in any private or discreet way, which meant they were left in a game of appearing as a unified front, not knowing who would speak up. Hori remained silent to let Uma take the initiative, curious himself what she would say to their investors.

“I tend to be a fatalist,” she began. “Whether it was us that got to this first or not, it would’ve happened, eventually. And we were always going to have to face these problems as a nation, as a global society. I think to a certain extent, this technology, what it does to the world, is somewhat out of our hands. We have power here, I won’t deny that. But my ethical belief is that we’re not a government, we don’t make laws, and it’s not our place to make decisions for people. Prohibition has proven a failure at every point in history. Regulations, fine, as much as they can minimize harm, they should. But nothing will stop people from doing what they want to do.”

“So you don’t feel responsible?” This came from a random investor with a german accent, whom the Gunndrson’s didn’t recognize. Here Hori was ready to rip into the accusing kraut, Uma remained a perfect poker player.

“Certainly I do. I, we as a company, should feel responsible for delivering what people want. If people want solutions, then that’s a debate to be had.”

“I think this is partly where Martha gets to shine, and can share with us her pitch.” Cale directed the conversation to the young Korean woman with dyed pink hair, who even virtually seemed bursting with excitement to share her idea.

“Thanks, Cal. So, the aggregate data of media surrounding the Temple platform falls along predictable political lines, with some interesting crossovers, but I think it’ll make sense to you all once I lay it out. It’s the same pattern: When a new tech platform emerges, the youngest people are the first to catch onto it, and they’re typically enthused about it, because it’s new and young like them, these technologies are always a mirror to the feeling of youth. At the same time, youth are the most susceptible to social conditioning, the need for acceptance, so it doesn’t take long for everyone to get on the bandwagon, especially if it’s a place without an adult presence.

“The adults, once aware of it, will almost unanimously admonish and call it a plague on society. After a few years and without any immediately obvious problems caused y the platform, it ages up, and older people get engaged. Once older people move in, their world comes with it, which means economy, which means everything else. And then you hold the paradigm and the gestalt as long as you can.

“Our champions are futurists, transhumanists, and while the matter is split, many environmentalists are on the bandwagon. They imagine a world with a highly decreased need for material production and consumption, and they have some good numbers to back it up. It’s a way to save the planet. There’s also the angle taken that it’s a mental health device.

“The predictable antagonists are luddites, most religious groups, though Buddhists are the most nonplussed by the whole issue. Many rural conservatives.

“Basically, almost every demographic is split within itself on the matter: Poor people across the board distrust it, yet use it nonetheless for the same reason they end up being drug users.

“The ones who pose an actual threat to the company are basically all the industries that are threatened by this proliferating, which is at least 60% of the global economy. All the computer and digital economy was ready for this, they can cash in a transition easily. Energy companies will take a hit, but will still e in business to keep all these people online all the time.”

“Sorry to cut in,” Hori didn’t even know what he was going to say, but he couldn’t stop himself. “But I think the simplest way to say it, is we’re facing a world where people are going online, and increasingly not going off. And the question is, who in this world has the power?”

At that, everyone was silent for a time. Until Caleb chimed in.

“And the answer to that is, we don’t know. As I said, I believe our role, and the one that assures we remain players in the game, is the role that provides solutions to problems. People living more and more of their lives in VR is only a problem if it’s viewed that way. If we’re to remain players in the game, I think a step we can take is to start looking into real estate.”

“Real estate?”

“Think of it as transitional housing. If more and more of the population are interested in living most of their lives on the Temple platform, then we need to provide the infrastructure for that. A new form of housing. Living arrangements where people can stay online as much as they want, in a manner that doesn’t compromise their bodily health. Personal isolation tanks, providing perfect nutrition to every part of the body, muscle stimulation to prevent muscle atrophy, some regulation to keep people from atrophying. We hope to prove it’s possible for people to live most of their lives virtually in a way where they still maintain autonomy, they;re still able to come and go as they see fit. WE’ve looked at the numbers, and the upfront cost to us to make these facilities optimal will be a little steep, but totally affordable based on future projections. IN the long term, why not see it as a win for the planet earth? In some metrics, if evenjust 30% of ht epopulation signed up to become members, tenants of thes facilities, we could smash the goals for the Paris agreement. It could be a transitional model for how people can live, full lives, totally removed from some of the most major problems plaguing the planet. Honestly, if people can get over their matrix phobia, I think it could save humanity and heal the planet. And it’s a choice left to everyone.”

“But, *we*  wouldn’t want people to *not* do this, right?” THhe question felt childish as soon as it escaped Hori’s nervous lips.

Caleb response gaurdedly, “Obviously, our businesses interests will always be in more customers. But I think Uma was spot on before. To a large extent, this thing we’ve introduced to the worl was inevitable, and now that it’s out there, it’s beyond our control. But I see no reason why our mission from this point can’t e entirely transparent, and I for one don’t feel an ounce of regret so far-- as long as we continue to be proactive in providing solutions.”

“Excuse me, I’m feeling a little faint, I need to hop off.” Hori pulled off his goggles and moved quickly to the bathroom, a wave of nausea twisting his insides. Uma quickly signed off, though more cordially, and met Hori in the bathroom.

“We were almost finished.” She ran the sink and wet a towel underneath it and hten put it to his face. “You could’ve hung in there a little longer.”

“ I couldn’t,” he said weakly, his body pulsing with adrenaline and vertigo. He took the towel and wiped it across his face and sat on the toilet, back slouched, staring at the ground. Then he looked up at her. “How are you holding yourself together?”

“By keeping things in boxes,” SHe returned, leaning against the sink. “What’s going on in the world is a separate thing from what’s going on with Sophie.”

“Is it?”

“It must be. Or else I’d be like you, right now.”

“But, that’s a willing delusion.”

“A functional one. If I let reality just wash over me, I’d be as useless as you right now.”

They hadn’t loved each other for a long time. They remained married because the arraignment worked well, their finances were impossibly tangled, they thought it was good for Sophie, and as business partners, they were clearly successful. Until Sophie’s episode, they were a force to be reckoned with, assured they were shaping the world of tomorrow.

Hori stood up and approached her with fists clenched.

“You think we had nothing to do with what happened to our daughter?”

“Of course not. See? Your head still isn’t clear. Of course it wouldn’t have happened without us giving it to her. But just as easily, she could’ve been someone else’s child, and gone against her parent’s wishes, and the same thing would’ve happened.”

“Your heart has always been cold. Cool customer, everyone always calls you. It’s a cold heart, is what it is.”

“You think I don’t care about her.”

“That’s how it seems to me now.”

“You know what I think is going to happen with Sophie, Hori? I think she’s going to end up in one of those graveyards Caleb was describing. I have no illusions about what that place he wants to build is: Packed like sardines, as many as they can fit in a space, all dreaming until they die. If Sophie hadn’t been the one, you would’ve sounded like Caleb and that Martha girl: freedom of choice, everyone deserves to live whatever kidn of life they want, all that. But because she’s *your* daughter, and you think you *own* her, that all of the sudden life is more worth living. You know what kind of world she’s been growing up in? Terror after terror, horror after horror, with no end in sight. And unlike our parents, who just had to sit there and look at it and go dead inside, our children got to escape it. And God Bless them, why shouldn’t they? Why should they continue to be miserable in this place?”

“Do you hear yourself? How can you not hear yourself? You want to euthanize her! You want her to give up on herself!”

“You can’t hear my words anymore. All you see is a woman you hate. Stop talking to me, we’re not going to get through to each other. Go talk to your daughter if you really want to find out. I already know her mind on this, don;t expect to get what you want.”

Uma left the bathroom, went out to the back porch overlooking their view of the ocean, and put on her goggles.

Sophie was reading Edgar Allan Poe, in particular that one poem, “A Dream Within A Dream.” Over and Over again, she read it, wondering why it started as a statement, and ended in a question. A knock came to her door, and she knew it was her father by the knock, and she whispered to come in. He smiled to her. “Some Poe?”

“Yup.” She closed the book and looked at her father. He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed.

“How’re you feeling?”

“Okay. Tired, I guess.”

“Funny, no matter how long you sleep, sometimes you still feel tired.”

“It’s called depression.” At first her father was taken aback, but she cracked a smile for him, so that he knew she at elast meant to make him feel some of the special flat humor they shared between each other. Then he placed a hand on her leg, and asked her honestly, coming from the most sincere part of their relationship, “What has made you so sad of late?”

“I don’t know.” She looked off through her window onto the ocean. “I think I’ve been sad for a long time.”

“I’m sorry it took me so long to figure out. I’m sorry, Sophie, that your mother and I have been so busy, and we assumed you were okay. YOu have nothing to blame yourself for, and we have so much to make up to you.”

“Thanks. I don’t think it matters now, though.

“I’m not expecting you to forgive us. All I ask is that you give us a chance to make it right.”

“Make what right?”

“Whatever it is that’s made you so sad, that’s made you want to not live this life.”

Sophie fell silent. Hori struggled with wanting to pull the words out her, as gently as he could manage. “Please, Sophie, tell me how you really feel. I don’t want you to feel like you must lie to me.”

“I feel like you’re saying that, but you don’t really mean it.”

“What?”

“I feel like you want me to just be happy again, and just love this life and that’s it.”

“No, I won’t judge you, I will accept whatever you say, I promise.”

Sophie began, knowing if she were to get what she wanted, she would have to say it, no matter how true or false her father’s promise.

“When I was in the Temple, I was happy. For years, when I’ve been here in this world, it’s not been happy. I’m alone. I don’t have any real friends, a lot fo times, because most of the people I meet at school are awful. And you guys have always been trying to make me ready to do something big and great and important. And I’ve never wanted any of it. And, I don’t think the world’s going to get better, I think it’s going to get worse. I don’t think humanity will survive the end of the century. I don’t think I’ll meet someone I love, I don’t think anything good is going to happen here. So, I don’t want this world. I want to stay in the Temple. And I don’t see why I should have to stay here if I don’t want to.”

While Hori paniucked inside, he did everything in his power to be like his hated wife, who’s willpower he couldn’t deny admiring.

“I think that’s all very understandable. Of course, your mother and I have been trying to give you and everyone else the opportunity to that world. I’ve always reasoned it was a good thing. Of course, you can’t understand as a parent, but a protective instinct kicked in with me, a certain sentimentalism, I acknowledge that. All I want is for you to be happy, on whatever terms you decide your own happiness.” He paused, trying to pick words carefully, and each delayed moment only affirmed the feeling that he was about to say the opposite of what he just had, despite all his promises, and yet he must.

“All I want then, is to leave you with an idea. The debate about reality goes back thousands of years. Today, we still can’t prove we’re not in a simulation already. As time goes on, it will probably only appear more and more certain that there is no reality, and everything is only simulated.

“You know Plato’s allegory of the Cave? Men strapped to a wall, and all they’ve ever seen is shadows, until one of them breaks free, and they see the fire and the puppets, and they climb up out of the cave, and at first the light is too bright and they go back into the cave, but with time, they go and bring their fellows out of the darkness. Implicit in that tale is a belief that the truth is better than a fabrication, an artifice. Why? In the unreal world, the men are bound by chains, so they are not truly free, they are slaves and prisoners. So with the truth, comes freedom. That’s how it was said long ago.

“But, does that still hold up now? And are we so certain the allegory is correct? I doubt it myself. But, here’s my stance, one I think forgot for a long time, and only with you falling asleep did I remember it: There is an objective world, called reality, something that is true, and it is bigger than you. And you are a part of it.

“That dreamworld you were in, might’ve been without pain or suffering, but it was not life. It was death. That’s to say nothing about death, but it doesn’t take account for the value of life, the value that in my own experience, is undoubtedly there. In a private dreamworld, while you might do anything you dream and imagine, you are not free, you are enslaved, and small, impossibly small. I know what’s real because of all the things that go against my wishes. Frustrating, yes, but real, and I know it’s real, because it’s far bigger than me. And that doesn’t make me or anyone insignificant, no, it makes each of us *bigger*, *connected*, a part of this thing which is frankly still a mystery.

“I agree with you and your mother, everyone has the right to pursue their happiness, in this world or any other world, contrived or otherwise. Sophie, all I ask of you is stay here a little longer, see if you might not see the beauty of a world that is *far* bigger than your dreams. I cannot promise it will be pleasant, in fact, you’re right, I’m most certain it won’t be--but it won’t be wholly unpleasant, either. You can still surprise yourself in this world. You can grow and learn lessons. You can understand the consequences. You can know a beauty bigger than any fantasy, any dream. And it will be *real*.”

Hori ran out of breath, felt exhaustion run over him. “I won’t force you to stay in this world. But I beg you, give reality a chance, for a little while longer. I promise it’ll be worth it. Or, I at least hope you’ll see what I see.” He reached out to give his daughter a hug, and she accepted it, even squeezed a little back. He started to pull himself up. “I know I promised you pesto pasta, and just went on and on about the virtues of reality, ut to be honest, in this moment I could use a bit of dreaming myself.”

“You can sleep here, if you feel like it.” Hori looked at Sophie and smiled, and with a few adjustments, he lay next to her with a throw blanket draped over him, and Sophie popped open her book to read,

“O God! can I not save

*One* from the pitiless wave?

Is *all* that we see or seem

But a dream within a dream?”