

Chad

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“You know I want to get in as much as you do.”

The muscles around her lips contract to form a small, slanted line segment. It feels sharp, and it cuts me deep—the same way it always does. I want her to understand. I don’t want to argue any more.

“Look around at this lecture hall,” I respond, twisting sideways in my chair and gesturing around the room. “Look at the blackboards, the stairs, the empty seats, the little arm desks. Look at me! Look at yourself, Sam. We are sitting here all alone in this virtual world.”

“Oh, Chad,” she sighs, inhales, softens. “I see and feel myself, but I also see and feel you.” She reaches out and places a cool, dry hand on my forearm. Electricity. “Isn’t that worth something?”

“Of course it is! Look, I’m sorry that I’m busy with lab work and clubs. But we both know that it’s necessary to get into an Outside School.” I peel her hand off my arm and turn her palm up, tracing lines with my finger. “Don’t you want to get rid of your dry skin? If they take us, we can fix all these little things. And big things, too. Don’t you want to help stop the freezes?”

The door opens and familiar faces start pouring in. I guess our discussion is over. She pulls her hand back, and I turn to face her again. Her slanty mouth is back, but it opens this time, “I want a lot of things Chad.” She stands and climbs up the tiers to the back of the room.

“Hiya, pal.” Kay bounces out of the doorway stream, plopping next to me. She is a happy bundle of scarves and yoga pants today. Yesterday, it was overalls and a straw hat. My contemplative frown is no match for Kay. At least someone has a sense of variety in this monotonous virtual reality. I cannot wait to use my vacation tickets

to explore one of the more interesting universes. “Almost ready to throw down the application? Or throw it up, rather. Regurgitate your life all over that thing!”

I laugh and pull out my notebook. The professor starts lecturing and I start doodling. I draw a car in the upper left corner of my paper. Then an octopus below it, in the margin. It’s funny how we finally make it through grade 15 and get to the interesting material, but we suddenly can’t seem to concentrate.

Half an hour into the lecture, the central portion remains blank, and I take a moment to stare at the whiteness of the page. The teacher’s voice occasionally swims to my ears.

“We do not know for certain, but the best theory as yet is that of Mayor Martin, the popular online forum personality, who believes the ‘freezes’ are a product of server load-balancing issues due to power grid outages on the Outside.”

I know this, of course, since I have been reading the forums since age four.

“My research shows this theory is almost certainly true, because temporal adjustments in limited regions are not allowed in the source code fabric. Although the Harstein Breakthrough exponentially sped render-experience of multi-dimensional universes, the only way to simulate at network scale is through massively parallel distributed processing. Spacial segmentation is logical, but necessarily asynchronous in case of something like the freezes. Freeze zones have always happened, since the beginning of the Inside, just in much smaller intervals.”

I sit upright at full attention. The first recorded freeze happened 7 years ago, or so I had thought.

“Freeze zones maintain all the physical laws programmed into our world. Mayor Martin postulates that the underlying machines lack computational resources, so they do away with everything nonessential. If the scarcity is bad enough, then the machines overcompensate by getting rid of too much ballast data. The result, which my lab has verified in our own simulations, is that time and other phys-

ical phenomena speed up in such a zone, often immensely rapidly. Simultaneously, computationally complex operations—such as human thought—are necessarily slowed to a crawl while the machines allocate resources to imperatives. This explains why people come out of day-long freezes as much as 80 years older, while feeling like they only experienced a few hours of slow time. Really, I find it remarkable that this is the only known defect Inside, given that this virtual world we live in was created 40 years before your births.”

“42 for me,” whispers Kay. She is going to have a problem if she ever gets frozen. Then we will see how much her 20 years stack up to my 22.

“It is even more remarkable when we consider that the power grids were initially designed to last only a quarter century before needing upgrades. I know it’s hard for you all, but try to picture a world in which the United States faced massive overpopulation and supply shortages. Green spaces were rapidly turned concrete, then frantically blacked-over with solar panels. The government gets its hands on Harstein’s patents through contracts with Outside School M to create a low power-consumption world without any of the problems of the real one. Wouldn’t you say that was an improvement? Wouldn’t you order all of your citizens to go in? For their safety.”

Sometimes I hate how the virtual reality is all I have ever known. Other times, I am glad. Clearly, Professor Shasta wouldn’t have had a problem mandating an exodus. It might have been virtual but it was all too real.

“Can anybody remind the class why the Inside is structured so?”

Kay’s hand is a bullet fired at heaven. “The government wanted to keep people happy, and they couldn’t figure out how to do it sustainably in virtual reality. All the VR toys they gave people ended up making folks depressed. Someone named Martin Weaver ran a study and found that the best way to keep the Inside stable was to replicate the U.S. before the energy crisis hit. That meant that people had normal jobs and normal lives, and all the fancy

neural implants had to go.” She paused for a breath. “But it’s OK with me, because I only take good notes with pen and paper!”

Professor Shasta allows a few chuckles and continues, “Thank you, Kay.” It’s the one thing I can’t stand about her. Kay’s an absolute Luddite! Tech can make everything so much more efficient. I look around the room and decide to leave class early. I’m too frustrated with Kay and Sam to concentrate now. I snap shut my notebook and walk out of the room. As I leave, I wonder how many air-projectors, implant cars, and prosthetic jets would be on the black market if they existed Inside, likely stolen from under the literal noses of the unwary by freeze thieves.

“I’m pretty nervous about decisions next week,” Sam says.

We leave school through the back doors, enter the alley which serves as a shortcut between campus and her apartment.

“Me too,” I confide. “But I’m sure they watch us post-submission, and I don’t know of many people who have worked as hard as we have after handing in the application.”

“Chad, you are so paranoid. Don’t you think the Outside Schools have better things to do?” She looks at me pleadingly. I know what this is about.

“Maybe, but until we hear back, I have to keep working.” Her eyebrows sink downward in disappointment, her eyes begin to roll. “I’m sorry, Sam, but I can’t let one week get betwe—”

Three men in ski masks jump out from behind a garage.

“—en us.” I immediately step forward and hold Sam behind me.

She yells “get between your face” and punches my side, stepping out next to me. She shouts at them, “What the hell do you fuckers want?” I would run if I were them. Sam blamed all the thieves for her dad’s heart attack two years back, chasing down a purse-snatching thief across the Brooklyn Bridge.

They don’t answer, just raise their baseball bats and advance. The middle one is the bulkiest, outweighing me by a good 200

pounds, but the other two look large without any intimidating muscle tone. I can definitely outrun them.

“I know what you want,” I say, desperately hoping to halt their advance. “You want this wad of cash!” I pull out my paycheck of 500 neatly packed digi-dollars. The hologram currency protrudes through the skin of my fist, blinking neon green in the sun. I clutch the small round circuitry as if my life depends on it. Because it does. Because Sam’s life does. Death Inside is death Outside.

Their eyes light up, and they stop advancing. They lower their bats slightly, salivating at the money.

“Come get it!” I shout, tearing down the right side of the alley. I squeeze between the fattest assailant and the brick wall before they have time to react. After I’m past, I turn around to make sure they are following. I am running slowly so they can hope at catching me. Sam shouts expletives at their backs.

I keep looking over my shoulder, pumping my right arm while holding my left high above my head. A couple of rats scurry under a dumpster as we pound past. The fools aren’t giving up quickly. I settle into pace for a long run, passing blocks of alleyway houses.

We pass Sam’s house where I know she will be safe behind her iron blast door. Sam’s mom is a security nut. The thieves follow me for another half mile before tiring of the chase. Frozen targets must be so much easier, I’m surprised they keep up for so long. I guess there must not be much left to steal since half our classmates’ families have been cleaned out while frozen. I feel sick thinking about it, so I sprint the remaining half mile to get home. I throw open the door with a swipe of my access key, slam it behind me, and pant hello to mom and dad.

Mom looks up from her chair in the corner of the kitchen. “Sam telephoned, she’s safe.” And back down to her crossword puzzle.

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“We love you, son. And we’re proud of you.” Dad passes me the mashed potatoes with a wink. “No matter what happens, we are family.”

Mom is helping herself to chicken. It smells like butter and warm gravy. “I remember when we thought the world had ended after we were frozen. But here we are, and I am so grateful to be eating with you tonight, Chad. Nothing matters more in the world at this moment.”

Dad looks puzzled. “I don’t know about that, June-bug. It’s pretty important to me that whatever sludge they pump into my real body tastes as good as these virtual potatoes!”

A smile tugs at my lips, but I can’t laugh with them. We are eating in our town house’s cozy kitchen and it feels too secure. I look at my parents faces, biologically 80 years old. The last time I felt too secure, they froze in the middle of dinner and grew 33 years older in a single night. The vow I made to myself still feels fresh: I would get into Outside School and fix the freezes.

I rise from the table. “Thanks for the food, but I have to prep for lab tomorrow.” Mom smiles a bit sadly, and dad looks like he is passing a kidney stone. Maybe he is. Every time, it must be painful for them to watch me leave. But if I can fix the freezes, nobody else has to feel these pangs of old age in the first place. At least never for a while, until they actually get old. I have to remember that my mission is more important for humanity than dessert. The immensity of the thought dwarfs my affection for my parents. “Love you,” I say as I push in my chair.

At that moment, Boxer pads into the kitchen. He laps up water from his bowl in the corner, and I stoop down to pet his back, scratch his romp. As I reach out, Boxer freezes in mid-lick.

“Boxer is frozen,” I announce. Mom and and dad haven’t finished eating, and they continue with barely a grunt of acknowledgement. A tear slides down mom’s face, but she is silent. I pat Boxer once, and turn to leave.

There is nothing we can do here.

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“Sorry Sam, but I have to go to lab. Look, I would love to have lunch and take a walk with you. I promise we can do it next week

after decisions. Right now, I can't stop thinking about how Boxer turned into a world record yesterday. My parents took him to the vet and he is anatomically 280 dog years old. He has cancer. I need to stop this, and the only way I can is to make it into Outside School."

Sam pauses, probably deciding what new angle to attack my argument from. I wait patiently, because my logic is infallible.

"I understand how it feels. And you are right, Chad. You are absolutely right." This is definitely new. "I just want you to know that I care about you deeply and want to spend every possible moment together now, because if one of us gets in, we might not hang around too long before peacing out. I am going to hang up now, and let you go work." Her breath is ragged, shuddering. "See you later," she croaks out before the dial tone slams into my ear.

I grab my bike from the garage. People are lazy and pedestrians make easier targets. The street is empty, as it always seems to be these days, so I ride down the middle lane of suburbia to test tube haven.

Maybe Sam's right. Maybe I am absolutely wasting my time in Dr. Bilok's lab. A week of research, or five days to be precise, certainly will not help with the freezes directly. But like Pascal, I must make this wager.

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I bump into a counter and drop a beaker of ammonium acetate. It shatters all over the vinyl floor. Dr. Bilok frowns, looking up from the microscope.

"Lately, you have been so unfocused."

"Sorry Dr. Bilok." Maybe coming here was a mistake. "It's application season and I don't feel as focused as I used to." I stoop with a dustpan to clean up the glass. "I keep telling myself why I am here, but it's hard to really feel motivated when everyone might be out of my life in a week." I don't know why the words keep pouring out. "I kind of want to use my vacation credits and just visit the beach." Bilok raises an eyebrow and I shut my trap.

“I wrote you a recommendation because you were the hardest working student I have ever had. But if you keep this up, I will have to set the record straight—they make us update the application, you know.” She turns back to her microscope.

I curse myself on the inside. “Sorry, Professor. I understand.” But actually I don’t. I don’t understand at all. “Why do they do this? Why do you do this? Isn’t it all pointless? Shouldn’t we all be able to go Outside?” I can usually see ten steps ahead but today I can’t see the counter in front of me.

Dr. Bilok doesn’t respond, so I calm down and continue cleaning. As I deposit the shards in the trash and mop up the mess, Dr. Bilok leans back in her swivel stool. She says, “Chad, brain-based issues follow us into the VR. Alzheimers is important whether you are frozen here or aged naturally out there. It might seem like I only care about these rats we work with, but that’s only because my children died in one of the first long freezes six years ago. We must carry on however we can. Sam understood this when she worked in my lab. As has every single student who has worked here and gone to Outside School. You need to understand, too. Maybe I can help by putting you in touch with one of my alums who got into Outside School. Yes, you should definitely talk to Earl. His favorite Schools were S and M, like you. Would you like to speak with him?”

I am speechless. Someone got into Outside School but didn’t go? Nobody has ever come back. He must have chosen to stay. I need to know why. “Yes, yes, I really would! Thank you so much Professor.”

“Good, now get back to work.” She pulls herself back to the table, peering down into a microscopic world.

We must carry on, she said. But the only way I can imagine carrying on is to go Outside, ideally with Sam.

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A message blinks on my cell phone as I shut off the alarm. It’s Thursday, and decisions are coming out over the next three days. I open the message with bated breath—and discover that Kay has gotten in. It’s a short message.

Essentially: “I got in bye.”

Would I do the same to her? Probably. The hunger for the Outside is too strong.

I roll out of bed and throw on some clothes for school. I grab a new notebook since I filled the other one up with doodles, filed it away in my drawer. My doodles won’t abandon me.

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“This mac and cheese is garbage.”

Sam and I are sitting alone on the second floor of the cafeteria. It’s officially called a food court, but we all know what it really is. A cafeteria.

“There is no spoon,” she replies. “And anyways, isn’t it better than eating alone?” She gestures down at the sea of individuals who gravitate towards the first floor. There is an unspoken divide; groups always eat upstairs.

“I miss Kay.” The cheese is starting to taste like melted silly putty. I shovel another spoonful into my mouth because I didn’t eat breakfast. I grumpily joke, “Will you at least call me and let me come over to say goodbye when you get in?”

She looks genuinely upset. “Of course I will, Chad. Just because I worked with Bilok for longer than you doesn’t guarantee me a spot. You have worked ten times harder than me. So if any of us is getting in, it’s you. But now I’m concerned. Because I don’t know if you would call me.”

“Are you serious, Sam? C’mon, you know I would.” She shakes her head and looks down at her salad. “Sam, hey.” I take her hand and squeeze. “Hey, I would, OK? I promise. I would swing by and give you and your mom a thousand kisses and hugs, and I would take us to the beach on my vacation credits. I have to spend those things before going, anyhow.”

She looks up. “I’m sorry, I don’t want to feel this way when things are so close. Thank you.” She stares at me with a sad little smile, gets up, and slides her fingers from mine. “I’ll see you in class.”

I'm walking to computational physics when I hear raised voices in a classroom up ahead on the left. The hall is empty because most people don't take so many classes as Sam and I do. I think I am hearing her voice because I'm thinking about her, but actually it is her voice coming from the open doorway. I tiptoe over and listen.

"It's his life goal. You cannot do this." Sam is shouting now. "I didn't get in, but at least one of us can. You can't just tell him to not go. Don't talk to him, please. What if you convince him? Just leave him alone."

"I will tell him facts and he can decide for himself. Have you ever had a problem with information?" It's an unknown voice. Deep. Male. Sounds like someone tall who wears a slim-fit suit and walks with a cane. For style.

"I have a problem with information when it is used selfishly to manipulate others," Sam retorts. "Even the best, most unbiased data can be misconstrued."

"Well, then I'll let you tell him yourself what I told you. So as to properly construe." The voice pauses. I feel it listening to the air. "Chad, why don't you join us?"

I was about to reveal myself anyways, but this voice shocks me into stillness.

"It's alright, I know you are there. Come on in."

I hear Sam turn and walk to the door, "Are you out here, Cha—ah, hi."

My eyes fall on the stranger as I enter the room. He is quite tall, and thin, but wears sweatpants and a baggy, long-sleeved t-shirt. He almost looks like a student, but his chin is held a few degrees too high.

"What's your name? What are you two talking about?" I look at Sam.

Sam places her hand on my shoulder. "Don't talk to him, Chad. I know you won't listen to me, but he really is not worth speaking with." She looks scared out of her mind.

“What’s going on?” I ask her. Sam just shakes her head, grabs her backpack from the floor, and leaves the classroom. I could hurry after her, but this calm stranger draws my attention. I decide to stay for a few minutes and find out who he is.

“My name is Earl, pleasure to meet you.” He doesn’t move, just speaks and stares at me with hazel eyes. “I would shake your hand, but we don’t want any undue contact, do we?” He says contact in a weird way, like he suddenly developed a Russian accent on the last syllable. Earl smiles like a reptile.

“You were Dr. Bilok’s student, right? She mentioned you a couple days ago.”

“Yes, Chad, I was a lab rat once, too. But then I got into Outside School. And I went. And now I’m back.” Why have I not heard of this guy before? Nobody has ever come back. He continues, “You are probably wondering why you didn’t know people come back. The answer is that nobody really leaves. But before I explain, I should first congratulate you. You made it into Outside School!”

I nearly faint. Everything Earl says seems to be true, and he clearly knows some things that I don’t. But I don’t faint, and I am still cautious. “How do you know?”

“Check your email.” I look down at my blinking device, which tells me I have one unread message from an unknown sender.

“OK, I believe you, but why were you arguing with Sam?”

“Ah, yes, that is precisely what I must explain. I want to advise you to stay here, to decline the acceptance and forget about the Outside Schools.”

“Are you off your rocker?! Why would I ever do that?”

Earl smiles even larger as he leans back into the desk behind him. “Because, my poor dear boy, it is simply not worth it.” He pauses and flicks a fuzz ball off his shirt. “When I got into Outside School M, I was ecstatic. I immediately accepted and left. I thought I was going to change the world, to make reality habitable again so we could all live real lives. I felt a profound sense of unease that nobody seemed to share, but I knew they would see it differently

from the Outside once I worked with the government to free us all.” He shakes his head. “Hah! The government. What a joke. We don’t even know what’s out there until we are Outside. How could we?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Chad, when you always want things to be better, you can never attain the best. I learned the hard way that people Outside are just the same as us Inside. We all just want to make things better. But there is conceit in thinking we can make substantial change, or cure diseases that have remained uncured since the beginning of humankind. And the Outside amplifies this conceit, because it is a land of people who made it, who were deemed worthy by their merits. It is a place of efficiency and optimization. It is a place where you lose your humanity. Even now, your friend Kay is discovering that she misses the Inside. She misses her friends. She misses the colors. For on the Outside, there is only a bleak, grey tomorrow.”

“OK, Earl. You have officially lost me. I don’t know what you are saying, but I don’t really care.” I turn, ready to find Sam. She was right, why was I talking to this lunatic?

“Wait—you can’t leave! You must not leave. Listen to me.” Earl is standing upright, all languidness gone. “The Outside isn’t real. You are a program.”

“I’ve heard it before, Earl. Nice try.” Every six year old kid wonders about this kind of thing. Then we grow up. “Goodbye. Please don’t bother Sam or me again.”

I am at the doorway. “Chad, I am not lying to you. Think about it. What are the freezes? Why can people enter and leave the same space as the frozen ones without aging themselves? Think about the freeze thieves. The freezes are not spacial glitches due to power loss. They are orchestrated attempts to draw computational brain power out of simulated creatures. Everything here is a program, and the purpose of this virtual world is singular—to evolve artificial intelligence. The Outside exists, but not for you because you are a program that they will extract brainpower from whenever they think you might approximate human thought.”

This is too much. “Yokay, loony toon. Peace.” As I speed-walk down the hallway in search of Sam, I hear Earl cracking up with laughter in the empty classroom behind me.

Sam’s home is beautiful. It was repainted light yellow last year, and it smiles down on the alleyway. Thankfully, I didn’t run into any thieves on the way here from school. I knock on the iron door, pulling out my phone for the tenth time to check if my acceptance email is still real.

The door opens, and I walk in. I head upstairs and find Sam on her bed. “Let’s go for a walk,” I say. She doesn’t move, so I lift her up over my shoulder and carry her laughing body down the stairs. At the doorway, I swipe my vacation tickets. I put Sam down and hold her hand. We open the door and step onto an expansive beach, a virtual reality inside of virtual reality. Dolphins jump in the water ahead of us. We run through the sand, kicking off our shoes and racing into the warm, salty water. Our clothes are soaked, but all of our devices are waterproof. Sam splashes me and I pretend to flinch, slowly moving closer until she stops and our noses touch. We hold hands under the clear, waist-deep water. I see the shore, endless beach except for the floating scan-pad that is our portal home. Behind where the door stood moments ago, the sun is setting the sky aflame.

Sam whispers, “I always knew it would be you.”

I hush her and we kiss, grasping each other in our arms and lips and thighs. We fall sideways into the water, still kissing while struggling to breathe. It’s a combination of the water and the sadness and the physical reaction my heart and respiratory system have to being near her.

We surface and stand once more, holding each other close. I say, “You were right, I shouldn’t have stayed to listen to Earl’s craziness.” I don’t know what else to say. “I’m sorry that I have to go.”

She looks up at me, and now I am facing the infinity of the ocean and the purple sky above. The water warms my waist, and I hug Sam tighter. I look down, and she says, "No, you aren't totally sorry. But I am glad you will go Outside. We could use some help in here."

The vacation zones don't have freezes. There is something different about them, which is why the owners can charge you so much for visiting them. I was lucky to get my tickets in a raffle at school. It's so peaceful and calm here.

We walk to the shore and lay in the sand. I bury my face in her hair. "I'm not sure what's out there but it will probably be crazy. And I don't know if I will make it back. I guess it's possible, but I don't want to become scary and weird like Earl."

"You already are scary and weird. But who gives a fuck about Earl?" Sam is laughing through her tears. "I love you."

Now I am crying, too. "I think I will probably go right after we get back. I can't wait because I want to get working right away and maybe find a way to reverse the freezes for my family. Maybe I can even save Boxer." We snifle a laugh of disbelief, and sadness.

The sun has fully set by now but there is twilight by which we can see each other and the beach and the ocean. The small, soft waves crash a gentle lullaby in tandem with Sam's heart against my side. The air is still mildly warm and humid.

"I miss you already," Sam softly sighs.

I shift in the sand to face her.

She goes on, "I used to be ambitious as you are now. I used to want so badly. Did you know I was like that before I met you?"

I don't know what she's talking about. "Wait, what do you mean?"

"Chad, when we are not together I can't stop thinking about you. And I need to know you understand that. Outside School doesn't matter as much to me as you do." She sniffles, "I'm much happier to be lying here with you now than I would be for the sake of an acceptance."

She lets that sink in.

I consider it. Turn over the thought in my mind. “I wish we had more time.”

“Don’t we?” she asks, “don’t we, Chad?”

“We do,” I reply. And I lean over to kiss her. On the forehead. On the ear. On the cheekbone. On her neck. On her breast. On her stomach. I gently trail my lips back up over her moist, sandy clothing. I take her face in my hands and softly press my mouth onto hers.

I pull back to focus on her eyes, planting my arms on either side of her head to hover over her. “I think about you, too.”

She pulls me down in a tangle of clothing and limbs and sensuous body parts.

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The sun is rising on the beach, and I know our time is almost up. I have tons of credits from work, so we could probably afford to stay, but it is bad luck to leave decisions in the air. Especially decisions like the one I have already resolved to make. I grab for my phone, open the email.

“Don’t leave,” Sam whispers to my chest. My heart throbs in response. For the first time, I doubt myself.

“Sam, Sam, Sam.” I kiss her hair, breathing in the saltiness. A lone seagull soars over the beach above us.

“Fuck it.” I click decline, reach back, and throw my phone out into the ocean. Sam gasps in surprise. I smile foolishly.

“What did you just do, Chad?” I stand up and stretch. I just made one of many decisions. I will think more about it later. I offer Sam my hand.

We walk along the beach in the direction of the portal. Sam’s card will get us back just fine. I’m thinking about my family. After we get back to Sam’s house I have to tell them what has happened. I guess Earl might have been onto something, after all. He just has a weird way of thinking about it.

We are a few yards away when it happens. Everything slows down, our eyes lock, and we smile with bliss.

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“He has achieved human-level ambition but he is content remaining in the simulation. We have finally found the solution. Keep them frozen for his lifespan and juice up the offspring. Recursively breed some of them until we have enough to last forever and the rest can begin performing exa-level computation. Use the rest of these two to create total recall simulation for analysis. We have been planning this for years, people. You know what to do.”

As subordinates scrambled to their stations, the director took a breath and leaned over the balcony. It was done.

A million phone calls were bursting through the lines, but those could wait. They were mostly obscure folks from the nets who were following Sam and Chad for a while. They probably thought their viewership meant they could call in and provide details that the Company missed. But nobody could have predicted the truth that would set them free.

The director raised his hands for silence. The assembled crowd held its breath. The director looked around as parents stifled their crying, children stopped their playing, elderly turned up their hearing implants. Expectation pervaded the group, but the director was thinking only of the past, when the marble floor of the open-air atrium below was shot through with sparkles from the sunlight bouncing off glass-metal walls. But today was cloudy, and the hills beyond the atrium and company lawns darkened with rain.

To the assembled: “We have achieved.”

A thousand cheers erupted across the floor, and across the globe.

He turned back and retreated from the frenzied air above the crowd. It was the pinnacle of his lifetime. The rest would follow so easily, so without notice or recognition. It was his idea to introduce Earl and plant the seed of self-awareness. Now the rest of his life would be spent dealing with the consequences. Taking note of slight

variations. Becoming a lowly viewer just like the rest of the world. Watching emotions develop in programs. Watching Earl introduced over and over and over again.

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We are skydiving through molasses. The wind whips Sam's gleaming brown hair around her face in slow motion. Streaks of grey creep up and down, growing wider among the brown. Sam's face sharpens, her cheeks hollowing, and a slight frown leaks from the corners of her mouth. I slowly tilt my head to watch as my foot touches the ground and pivots towards her over the course of 15 years. I rotate back to smile at Sam, tears forming 30 years too late. I raise my arm, reaching for her face as it transitions from incomprehension to resignation to acceptance. Wrinkles appear as her mouth and eyes crease to form a sad smile. My hand rests on a foreign yet familiar cheek, and we pull each other close—straining against the past—to embrace for the first time in half a century. I feel her heart pounding wildly, but it must be a world record because it could only really be beating once per year at this rate. We nestle our necks, nuzzle our cheeks, and I pull Sam tighter to me, reach up to stroke her hair as it falls from her scalp. We gaze upwards, statues staring at a fast fast forward sky. Even like this, they are so beautiful, the clouds. I hear Sam start to sob, the way she sometimes sobs when we hold each other in our souls. She begins to say my name, but I can't hear because the ocean roars a million roars and the tears are blurring and cataracts and noise and darkness, smiling.