

There She Was

Before he registers the movement, his arm reaches out, as if by instinct, and he grasps the cool metal neck of the bottle. In the same moment that he notices the contraband in his hand, a smooth feminine voice speaks.

Put it back, James.

Even though he knows She isn't programmed to register facial expressions, he rolls his eyes and attempts, yet again, to communicate. "It's Jim, remember?" With no response from the voice, he replaces the bottle and walks out of the shop. The walkways hum with life, but there is no conversation in the air. Everyone's eyes are glazed over; watching personalized news stories from the space between their eyes and nose. It would be so easy, he muses; so easy to relieve the blank faces of their currency. All it would take was a flick of the wrist and the hard drives along the whole block would be emptied.

Stealing is illegal and immoral, James.

Of course She would think so. He wasn't sure what others would think... he had spent his life in solitude. Well, near-solitude; the last four years he has had the voice as his companion. The chip in which She lives was a stipulation of his parole, yet since the implantation, She has been more comfort than punishment. Thanks to legal precedent set in the early 21st century, 'influenza' was the defense mounted by his lawyers when he was fourteen and on trial for theft. Now that he thought about it, the parole was about to expire; his eighteenth birthday was only a week away.

A recorded message welcomes him 'home' once the sensory pads had picked up his weight and his pupils had been scanned to gain entrance to the massively empty house. With no one to reprimand him, Jim ignores what is, in all likelihood, his mother's newest intern

informing him that his parents would be away for the foreseeable future, and drops into the sensory tank connected to his state-of-the-art gaming console. This was actually a prototype; no official company had associated with it yet, but Microsoft was expected to integrate it into their new line of ZED-box systems, debuting at the Consumer Electronics Show 2040 next January. It had been a 17th birthday present, but he knew that his parents had simply approved the gift once the proposal was given, much like the advertisements for the Mars 4 colony they were overseeing. The tank and his games were the only thing that kept him stimulated, but even in the heat of battle, She would still reach out to his consciousness to remind him that *gaining pleasure from others' pain is not productive*. Whatever.

Jim would lose himself in worlds of his own creation, with action and adventure available at the slightest whim, but he found himself returning more frequently to the Second Life program that had come pre-loaded on the tank's hard drive. At first, he had avoided the seemingly boring simulation; after all, who would walk around a city when they could do literally anything with no risk? Lately, he had found friends, and even though they were essentially a few lines of code, they seemed to understand. This time, however, he turned away from their usual café, and headed up to a part of the virtual city that he had never seen before. The best part about Second Life was that everyone was there for him; it was his world, and he was not ignored when he was there. On a whim, he turned a corner, and a woman was just standing in the middle of the street. Something seemed familiar about her, but he couldn't place the generic heart-shaped face or the mid-length brown hair. Everything about her seemed average, and yet he was drawn to her. She turned to look at him and opened her mouth to greet him, not unusual in this world tailor-made for him, but when she spoke he froze and looked around in shock.

Hello, James.

She was here. It had to be, but it couldn't be, but there She was. Some reflex inside of him triggered, and he blurted "it's Jim," before dashing back around the corner. The 'people' here had been programmed to call him Jim, they didn't know his real name, and didn't possess the logical faculties to figure it out. AI was expensive, and this was just a prototype, after all. There was no one else it could be, but it seemed impossible that She would manifest herself at all, other than her normal disembodied voice. He tried desperately to get an explanation, a response, anything, but She would not react. She never did, unless he did something illegal.

No longer interested in playing games, he scrambles to unhook himself from the tank and runs into the main part of the house, looking for anything She might disapprove of. He tears through the kitchen, starting small fires to try and draw her into reacting.

Stop that, James. Arson will not solve your problems.

He was stunned. She had never mentioned reasoning before, only the legality of his actions. Was She changing, or was he?

It doesn't matter, She will be gone after tomorrow.

Had that been his thought, or hers? He wasn't sure, but the thought depressed him. She had been his one reminder of the greater world, and in twenty-four hours She would be gone.

The Next Day

He hadn't slept at all; he had stayed up all night imagining his world after She was gone. No one to tell him that *violence for violence's sake is immoral*, or that he *should not jaywalk*. She was a court-ordered punishment, yet She became the closest thing he had ever had to a mother.

An alert appears before his eyes, a reminder of his appointment at the clinic. He casts the notification away with a flick of his eyes, and even though the text disappears, the implications of the appointment are seared into his retinas. He drags himself out of the tank, since he had used the entire night trying to rediscover that side street from earlier, to no avail. The rest of the morning passes in a blur, and he doesn't notice anything except a familiar average face that seems to live in the corner of his vision.

When he arrives at the clinic, everything happens in a disconcerting paradox, the seconds seem to drag on for hours, yet the hours pass in what feel like seconds. The other patients around him make a mechanical-sounding buzz just by being present, even though everyone but him has no focus for anything beyond the tip of his or her nose. His focus does not even enter the physical world, and when his name is announced, it takes him five repetitions to recognize his name in a voice other than hers.

“James Chapman, James Chapman III?”

Even though he reflexively thinks “it's Jim,” he responds with “that's me,” and follows the line of indicator lights to his room. Before he succumbs to the anesthesia, he throws out a desperate plea, hoping that She will acknowledge his last attempt at communication. “Are you there? How did you show up yesterday?” After a moment, he gave up and released his body to the influence of the drugs. Just before he loses consciousness, She speaks.

Be good Jim, and happy birthday.

She hadn't called him that before, but he only caught the change after the surgery, so it was too late to talk to her, too late to ask just how much She had known.

After a week of listlessly sorting through the mindless violence available to his tank, he returned to Second Life without particularly meaning to. He had changed his user profile, and now all of the simulated voices called him James, but none of them had her mechanical accent, and without that, his name sounded like his father's and grandfather's. He kept meaning to change it, but never got around to doing so, even though it would have been easy and he wasn't necessarily busy. He spent most of his time walking around the city; he didn't meet with the characters that had been his friends, and couldn't find anything to hold his attention. Then, there She was.

How have you been, Jim?