

Vanessa Reele

Vanessa mindlessly runs her fingers over the smooth gloss of the darkwood table. Her eyes linger on the arrangement of artificial hydrangeas sitting in a cream colored vase that reminds her of the heavy cream her mother once put in her coffee every morning. Her mind started to wander at such a peaceful memory.

“Ms. Reele?” Her memory is interrupted by the receptionist standing behind a large but simple desk. “You can go in now.” Vanessa’s jaw clenches slightly as she stuffs her hand back in the pocket of her coat and walks down the carpeted hallway. Everything in this hallway is yellow, the color of happiness, but Vanessa can only think of how she wishes she had her sunglasses on her. Everything is too bright, too solid, too imposing. She reaches the end of the hall and stops in front of an unmarked door. Without bothering to knock, Vanessa turns the handle and steps inside.

“Hello Vanessa.” Vanessa doesn’t look at the man right away. She takes in her surroundings first. Ever since its conception when she was a child, Vanessa is always amazed by the magic that the Reality Projector creates. She looks above her at the machine that is calibrated to the layout of the room. next to her head small clouds float by, white, fluffy, and as realistic as the ones that are floating in the sky outside. Her sneakers have almost completely disappeared in the fog curling around her ankles and the space is painted in the strangest mixture of purple and blue and white, the way the bathroom sink looked when a young Vanessa washed her hands after finger painting. The pattern continuously swirls and changes in a slow rhythmic pattern that visually lulls her senses to a peaceful din. She lazily draws her attention at last to the man in the chair.

“Doctor Skai. What do you call this world?” She asks slowly drifting to the couch opposite him. Except for the minimal furniture in front of her, the walls and the ceiling have mostly disappeared. Even the door she just entered through has dissolved. She and the Doctor are cocooned in the rainbow.

“It’s a program of my own design. It monitors your brain activity and creates a world based on that.” His words come out deliberately and his eyes watch her relaxed expression as if waiting for her to pounce.

“And what does this world tell you about me?” her mind wakes up enough to try and analyze the surrounding details to try and decipher something but the colors seem to become more vibrant and her pulse slows again.

“Shall we begin?” He crosses his legs calmly, ignoring her question. His tone is that of a person who has nowhere to be. In his lap is a plain unmarked file, an artifact next to the hologram screen floating next to the armrest of his chair. He is in control. The colors around Vanessa get stronger as she feels the forceful release of tension in her body.

“I don’t have much choice in the matter.” Again, he acts like he didn’t hear her.

“Do you know why you are here today, Vanessa?” She pauses. She bites the inside of her cheek in contemplation.

“I was told to come here.”

“But do you know why?” Doctor Skai presses. He glances at the file sitting in his lap before fixating his gaze on Vanessa’s troubled expression.

“No.” She finally admits. The words come out in a slight croak like the word burned her throat on its way out. Doctor Skai raises his eyebrows but manages to look like he isn’t surprised. He reaches into a bag at his feet that Vanessa never notices until now. From it he produces a dome-shaped object Vanessa quickly recognizes as some sort of helmet. It is smooth and metallic on the outside, and a set of straps protrude from the inside of the helmet. Doctor Skai offers the helmet to Vanessa which she takes with both hands. The metal is cold to the touch as if notifying her that it only brings bone-chilling things to those who wear it. “I’m not much of a hat person.” She jokes weakly.

“It’ll give you the answers you need.” Vanessa waits but the Doctor says nothing more. He is waiting for her to don the device.

“What if I don’t want any answers? Isn’t it a natural defense mechanism of the brain to forget?” Vanessa recalls a vague memory of a “cool-science” web article she briefly skimmed at one time.

“You need these answers” Doctor Skai’s words sound final. Vanessa’s hands start sweating as she grips the smooth metal and delicately places it on her head. She feels silly buckling what is essentially a strange bike helmet onto her head when she isn’t going anywhere but quickly swallows her embarrassment. Since the makers felt it was necessary to put straps on, she feels compelled to use them.

Once the buckle clicked into place, a small red light under the surface of the metal turns on. She feels something small poke her in the back of the head under the helmet, making her jump a little. After a moment, the light turns from red to green.

“Now what?” She tries her hardest not to feel like a microwave about to ding when her brain is done cooking. Doctor Skai’s attention is now on the hologram screen next to him. She is unable to read his one-way hologram but he presses a few buttons and stares at the screen as if he’s analyzing something. He doesn’t say anything to her at first.

Vanessa takes this time to take in her first impression of the doctor. He has yet to stand up during their encounter but his posture suggests he stands at around six foot with a slim build like a man who isn’t crazy about the gym but is conscious of his health enough to run at least once a week. While he is young, Vanessa guesses either around her age or 30 at the oldest, he carries himself with a mixture of confidence, reassurance, and experience that suggests he’s been in this office for some time and isn’t surprised by anything anymore.

Vanessa came to his practice through referral by her HoloPhys. HoloPhys is what replaced everyday physicians twenty years ago. There are still regular doctors who specialize in surgeries, births, and other more delicate procedures, but pediatricians were run out of business at the introduction of Regan, the kid-friendly hologram software, and physicians followed soon after with the introduction of HoloPhys, the adult version of Regan. Both programs are synced to small sensors on the body that became the medical norm for most of humanity thirty years prior. The sensors monitored basic brain activity, pulse, heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Regan and HoloPhys take the data collected from the sensors and make health suggestions a couple times a month or when prompted by the user. Suggestions can vary from a change in diet, to a visit to a specialized health professional. This is how Vanessa ended up in this chair with a strange helmet strapped to her head.

“Have you turned off all your devices?” Doctor Skai seems to be finished reading his screen.

“Oh I forgot my phone at home so I’m all set.”

“Then let’s begin.” A hint of eagerness flickers in the doctor’s eyes but he leans back in his chair resuming his slow pace. “This helmet will help you remember what happened on the 24th of March.” Vanessa feels her pulse quicken and her palms begin to sweat. Without her consent, her body starts to panic. The helmet beeps once softly and like a firework, another room suddenly explodes into Vanessa’s purple, blue, and white world, changing the scenery from a world of color swirls to a dark room in an apartment. Everything is neat and orderly, but there is very little sign of life. The blinds on the windows are drawn and the couch looks barely sat in. There is only a single coffee cup left on the counter in the kitchen to indicate that anyone lives here at all. Vanessa stares at the coffee cup with an intense recognition her mind is trying to place. The helmet has recreated her home. On this particular morning, Vanessa had company.

There is movement caught in the corner of her eye and Vanessa’s heart rate increases at the sight of herself. A memory of an old movie about a Christmas scrooge floating through his past Christmases comes to mind as she watches herself from her seat. Her virtual self is in pajamas walking to the kitchen. She takes the lone mug off the counter and rinses it out before pouring another cup of coffee. She stands for a moment enjoying the caffeine and Vanessa’s brain starts to remember. Her pulse quickens with anticipation of something coming that she can’t quite recall all the way.

“I thought you were going to bring me some too.” A voice calls from the other room. Vanessa whips her head around to see a man walk into the room from the direction of her bedroom. *Adam*. The name flashes in her memory like a huge light up sign. He strolls through the room like he’s been there

before and just as he reaches the kitchen, he freezes like someone hit pause. Vanessa directs her attention to the doctor, whose hand hovering over his hologram screen.

“Vanessa who is this man?” He doesn’t sound accusatory or like he’s confused. He is asking her to remember.

“Adam Evans.” The name rolls off her tongue like she’s said it a thousand times before. Without trying to, she relishes every syllable.

“How do you know Adam?” Doctor Skai pushes. Vanessa struggles a bit. She looks back at the paused stature of the man in her apartment.

“We went to school together.” She finally recalls a memory of a small boy with a toothy grin. “I didn’t really know him back then...” Vanessa’s voice trails off.

“And what about here?” Doctor Skai’s voice becomes more of a calming sound rather than a voice, egging her memory on, forcing her to explore the depths of her hippocampus.

The scenery changes and Vanessa sees her spotty memory projected recreated in her surroundings:

The recreated Vanessa is sitting at her desk in her living room staring at a miniature scale model of New York City in real time. She sits there watching the small specks of people move in morning rush traffic as she sips her morning coffee. Every morning Vanessa watches the city without any particular purpose or need. She does it to feel the life of the city. She has a conference call with a new startup, looking to create “the next big logo” that will drive their presence on the market in an hour where she’ll have to put on clothes that aren’t sweatpants and T-shirts. The meeting is only to smooth out the fine details before Vanessa gets started on the design. Since it is a Tuesday, Vanessa is also expecting her grocery delivery at around 1 PM.

After making a standard lunch of cold cuts on rye, she will run on the treadmill for an hour. Treadmills have become accurate enough to emulate running so that the user gets more exercise out of it with less stress on the joints. When the virtual reality came to the mainstream, treadmills became all encompassing, allowing people to run on the beaches of Maui or hike on the Great Wall of China. Vanessa likes to run on the empty streets of Brooklyn.

When she has down time, Vanessa will go into the chat rooms to talk to her pen pal Jane. Jane lives in Singapore and has a brilliant mind that Vanessa loves to pick concerning topics ranging from politics to the next big invention. Chat rooms vary from strange worlds where everything is cat themed, to normal looking cafes and lounges. One time when Jane was in New York on business, she reached out to meet up and have a real cup of coffee at a real cafe. Vanessa told her she was busy. She doesn’t go outside much anymore.

This particular day, Vanessa is sitting at her desk watching the people when a small icon of a bell pops up next to her. It rings like a doorbell, telling her that she has a visitor. Vanessa checks the time. It isn’t yet time for her groceries to be here. She isn’t expecting a package and her mail comes in silently through the Internet. She pulls up a screen that shows her the video feed from the camera trained at her doorstep. There stands Adam.

“This is how you two met?” Vanessa is pulled out of her memory at Doctor Skai’s words. She lets out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

“Yes.” Her voice sounds stiff. She feels stiff. “He was looking for a neighbor who wasn’t home. His cousin.”

“And you two started dating?”

“That’s a little personal.”

“This is therapy Vanessa.” Vanessa took several deep breaths.

“Yes we dated. For almost two years.” Doctor Skai’s look was that of a cautious animal waiting to see if she was a threat.

“And what about now?” Vanessa opened her mouth to answer but the words came up muddled and confused. ‘*What about now?*’ She asked herself.

“I-” She started but soon stopped. She didn’t know how to finish that sentence. The helmet seemed to notice her distress and her room disappeared and morphed into a different scene.

She recognized it as the roof of her apartment building, twenty stories up. The wind was blowing harder up here and the sky was overcast. Ten feet in front of her, Adam was standing, but he wasn’t looking at her. He was wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants and he had a pair of goggles over his head. His eyes were frantically moving around as if following a frantic bird that she couldn’t see. Vanessa’s palms were sweaty. Her mind knew what was coming but she couldn’t make sense of the data to know what the outcome to this would be.

“Adam!” Her recreated self yelled over the wind. He seemed to finally realize she was there.

“It’s so beautiful Ree.” Ree was his pet name for Vanessa, after her last name, Reelee.

“Adam come back here!”

“This is exactly what my mom was telling me about. This place is beautiful.” He is talking nonsense. Vanessa’s heart rate keeps going up as the finale of her memory comes closer, threatening to tear her sanity apart.

“Adam let’s go back inside.” Virtual Vanessa sounds panicked. Vanessa feels panicked.

“You know what the best part about this place is? That it isn’t real.” Vanessa’s heart drops. her hands clench into fists and her nails dig into the skin of her palms. But the nightmare won’t stop. “Ree come here. You haven’t felt the freedom of this world. Everything that we are told to believe about happiness. No one dies, everyone is healthy, happy, and carries out good deeds. We can freely change anything that we want about ourselves.”

“Adam listen to yourself. This isn’t real. Take the goggles off and you’ll see for yourself.” Adam recoils at her words. His hands hover over his eyes like he’s protecting them.

“Ree I thought you understood. You were the one who was stuck living in that apartment.” Vanessa feels her vision cloud up and her breathing is in gasps now. “We never saw eye to eye on what it meant to be alive. Well here is the solution. And I’ll show you.” Adam starts walking backwards, moving closer to the edge of the building.

“Adam? Adam stop. Stop it right now.” Vanessa’s voice is even more shrill and panicked. She can’t get the words out fast enough.

“The world is beautiful Ree. It can’t hurt us anymore.” Adam is now standing on the ledge with a smile on his face. “You’ll follow after me right? Once you know the truth you’ll come too.” Before Vanessa can say anything more, Adam takes his final step and disappears off the ledge.

Vanessa scrambles with the clasps under her chin and throws the helmet on the ground, far, far away from her. She is gasping for air like she was stuck underwater and her forehead is covered with a layer of cold sweat. The roof melts away and she is back in the room of colors, this time the dark color of deep water. Doctor Skai remains silent, watching her, waiting for her to regain her composure. Her memory hits her like a wave. All of the early days, the butterflies, the adventures, the days she spent outside her apartment, her first in many months. They ate at restaurants, stood in crowds, talked to strangers, and fell in love. Adam’s job was to test out new products for the virtual reality platform. it’s been the most versatile invention for use by the masses since the Internet. Adam’s last project was a pair of goggles that could supposedly draw from people’s memories of deceased friends and family and recreate them so that they could essentially be reborn. Adam lost his mom and younger sister in a car accident at a young age and never got along with his father. He wanted this invention to work. Even more than any of the other prototypes that he tested, this one was personal.

He spent hours with the device, sometimes at his own apartment, sometimes with Vanessa at hers. At first it just seemed like he was invested in his job. Then Vanessa slowly noticed him becoming more and more shut-in. They didn’t go out much, and he would stay in the goggles’ world for longer and longer. Sometimes he would forget to eat so Vanessa had to remind him. He told her that he reunited

with his mom and sister and that they were taking him to all of these new unexplored worlds. He met his high school teacher, the one that made him fall in love with technology and inevitably put him on the track of beta testing inventions in the first place. He started to become stuck in the past. Eventually, it became evident to Vanessa that he was rejecting reality, favoring this world where nothing dies and everything is reversible. One day, she woke up next to him to see that he slept with the goggles on. From then on he was never without them. She had lost him. The day on the roof happened a week later.

Vanessa looked at her doctor's face. He already knew everything. The second she walked through the door, the second he had her file, he knew why she was there. She was monitored for her health at a nearby hospital for two days, running various psychological test but they were all moot because of her lost memory.

"Do you know why you're here Vanessa?" Doctor Skai asked.

"Yes." Her voice sounded too quiet. He takes something out of the bag at his feet. This time, instead of a helmet, he hands her a print out of a news article. On it is a photo of her apartment building and the headline, "Man Confused by Reality Jumps Too Far." Vanessa starts to feel nauseous.

"You have to talk about it Vanessa." Doctor Skai no longer looks like a confident young doctor. He is talking to her with the concern of one human to another.

"I don't want to." She says lowering her gaze.

"Then you'll end up ruined forever." there is silence as Vanessa considers his words, rolling them over in her head, trying to decide what to say next. "I am going to program your HoloPhys to have you come see me a couple times a month, just to check how you're doing."

"I don't need to be babysat." Vanessa suddenly feels tired. All she wants to do is go back to her apartment and sleep. But her apartment will now be haunted by her returned memories.

"This isn't a suggestion Vanessa. I'm a doctor and I am telling you to come see me. Therapy isn't a one shot job."

"Not yet." They look at each other and understand that she is only half joking.