

**REALITY**

**T**here is no furniture around me, no objects. Only a hundred or so green plants lining the walls of my studio. At the end of the room, a glass wall looks out over the horizon to the west. Thousands of dwelling cubes extend as far as the eye can see.

Between me and the glass wall, there is my mother.

She has her back to me, which suits me just fine.

I never thought I would share a space with her again.

I know we were alone together when I was born. We must have spent time waiting for nothing in particular, doing nothing but discovering each other in complete innocence, at complete ease. I must have observed her from the other side of the bottle of formula she held balanced between our faces. I'm sure she whispered to me all the love a mother has for a newborn. And I must have adored her, with the single-mindedness of first love.

Which may explain why I couldn't abandon her.

At least, not completely.

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It's snowing today. From where I am standing in the centre of my studio, I see nothing but white expanse outside, filled with noise, like a television screen at the end of the broadcast day a half-century ago.

I never look outside, but my mother's presence forces me to reflexively raise my eyes every so often, as if I can sense a menacing insect nearby.

For a long time during my childhood, when I was planted in front of the television, my mother could approach without my

noticing. She would have to repeat my name impatiently three or four times before I would come back to what she called ‘reality.’

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Every day, I disinfect my mask and gloves. I say *gloves* out of habit, but they look more like wafer-thin suction cups perched on my fingertips. The mask, which is just as delicate, covers the eye area like glasses, hooked behind the ears, the only difference being that the arms relay sound. The whole set-up weighs three grams. I could use immersion lenses and leave my face bare; I always try out the new models when they hit the market, but I can’t stand foreign bodies on my corneas.

Every day, I moisturize my face and my hands. I stretch. I swallow a protein bar and a half-litre of water. I make sure the studio floor is clean. I set down my locomotion mat. I put on the mask and gloves.

And I cross over.

I enter virtual reality, and I reunite with Anouk, my avatar, made of mesh and a patchwork of photography textures in 16k resolution, who is standing there, before me. Her skin is more lifelike than my own. Her eyes are brighter. Her breath is always even, deep. In resting position, she shifts her centre of gravity from one foot to the other with a subtle movement of her pelvis. She nods, blinks, clasps her hands in front of her stomach. Then, in a slow, graceful gesture, she drops her arms to her sides as she rises up on her toes for a few seconds. And the animation starts over, without fail. Often, as soon as she enters my field of vision, the desire to modify her face or body dictates the avenues of my research.

I have a lot to do today to finish settling my mother into my apartment.

But first I have to reinitialize myself.

I am going to create a minimalist scene, undress Anouk, keep her skin, her eyes, and even the tattoo that has graced her shoulder blades for the past week – a dream catcher with a long feather that reaches down to the swell of her buttocks. I am going to swap out the black mane for a classic chignon, perhaps in silver. Place her in a white environment, with a single source of radiant light. Something simple. To try to restore my calm.

I am going to drop all the emotional trait modifiers for her face down to zero. Purge her of any emotion. Until mine disappears as well.

The past few weeks, I've spent too much time offline, far from the digital ether. I was starting to suffocate.

I have to become an image again. As fast as I can.