

REFLECTIONS ON A LIFE STORY

A fresh start.

BY M. DARUSHA WEHM

The face staring back at me from the mirror is unfamiliar yet I know it's mine. It *feels* like me, even if I still fail to recognize myself sometimes. I am told this is my actual body, that this world is the real world. The life I thought I had, the world I believed to be real — those were cleverly controlled electrical impulses sent to my brain. Not real. Not me.

Yes, I asked *why*. Of course, I asked *how*.

"There are many reasons a person might be placed in simulation," my first therapist, Kris, told me. "Rehabilitation from antisocial behaviour, military training. Interrogation." I must have looked appalled. "Oh, it isn't all like that. Some people choose it themselves, like a vacation or entertainment."

"Did I?"

Kris smiled. "If it helps you to think that, perhaps that's what you should choose to believe."

"But what was it, really?"

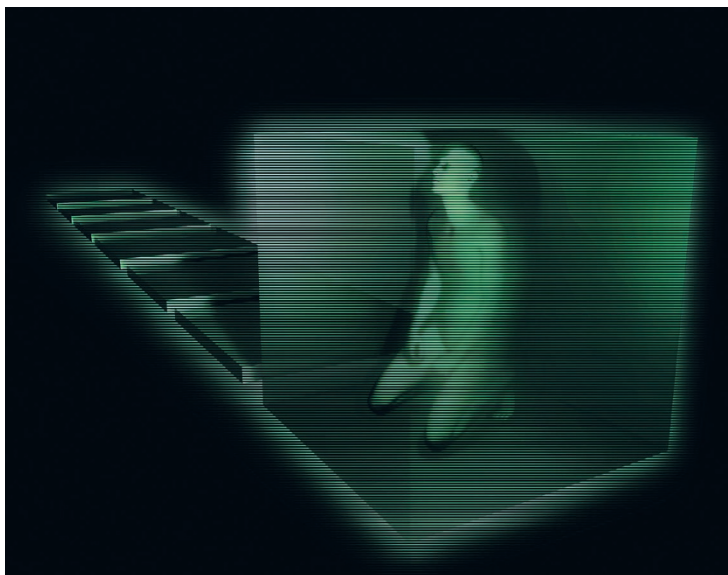
Kris shrugged. "Why does it matter? You're here now."

It takes many sessions and another therapist before I accept that I will never know why. Two therapists later, I honestly don't care. I don't care why my body was hooked up to IVs and electrodes, why another life was created and curated, forced into my mind. I don't even care that I can never believe in reality again.

Oh, I have no doubt that my therapists are sincere, that they believe what they say, but no one will ever convince me. How could I be sure this is real when I know that the life I thought was mine was a simulation? Once you know your own eyes can deceive you, your own memory is a rewritable disk, you can never be certain. If one life can be a puppet show, any life can be. It's turtles all the way down.

"How are we feeling this week, Gil?"

I'm thankful that Samia, my latest therapist, has finally agreed to say my name with the hard 'g' — Jill or Gillian feels more wrong than the face in the mirror. The patronizing



plural, on the other hand, I can do without.

"Fine. Better."

She nods for too long, waiting for me to say more, to unburden myself. To express my feelings.

Too bad. I can wait as long as anyone.

She purses her lips, then breaks the silence. "Do you miss them?"

I don't have to ask whom she means. I had a good life in my created world. Nothing spectacular, just an ordinary existence, but it was comfortable. Fulfilling in its own unremarkable way.

"Sometimes." I sigh and decide to throw her a bone. "The other day, I saw a woman who looked like her. Not exactly the same, just something familiar about the way she carried herself, the movements of her body. It was disconcerting, unnerving." I see my reflection in the window behind Samia's desk, the short blonde hair I still can't figure out how to style, smooth scrubbed skin from my failed attempts at trying out make-up.

"How did that make you feel?"

I think about the question, like I am meant to. That's the whole point of being here, to work through how I feel about this experience. To get past it.

"I feel... blank."

Samia writes something on her tablet, nodding. She nods a lot — all the therapists

do. "It will take time before the experiences in the simulation no longer seem real, before you settle

into your true body, your true life. It's normal to feel like this world is empty for a while. It will pass."

I nod back and arrange this face into the shape of a smile. We end the session and I leave her office, feet tracing a path back to the apartment, where I will stare into the mirror.

It took months to convince me — charts and logic and explanations and unending patience. For a long time I fought them, even though I couldn't understand why they would be trying to fool me, how they could imagine I'd ever think that my life was a lie. But it was.

That was not my beautiful wife. Those were not my mad-

dening and marvellous children. The face and body I saw in the mirror and quietly despised were never mine to hate.

The therapists think they understand what it's like to know that your entire sense of who you are isn't real. They think that it is painful, disorienting, something that needs to be overcome. They don't understand anything.

I never did see a woman who reminded me of her. It was just the kind of thing I was expected to say, the kind of thing that would make Samia make a tick on her tablet and a note on my file. *Subject is experiencing feelings of emptiness.* There was no point in explaining that this wasn't what I meant at all.

I am not the person I thought I was, and that is a joy. I am not the person anyone needs me to be, not defined by my relationship to anyone else.

I am blank. A fresh canvas, the blinking cursor.

I look at the face in the mirror knowing this may be another prison, another interrogation or training programme. It might even be real, like Samia claims. It doesn't matter. Here, I have no history, no expectations, no baggage. I am free and unencumbered.

Free to discover whom I want to become. ■

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