

MEMORIES TO COME

Is this the real life?

BY PAUL ALEX GRAY

The lights wink on as Matthew drives through the familiar patchwork suburb. Snow dusts the shadowed edges of the houses and that's how he knows it's not real. It hasn't snowed in years.

He pulls into the driveway of the first home he shared with Cynthia. Shivering his way across ice to the front door, he runs through half-crafted sentences in his head.

"Does she know I'm coming?" he asks aloud, his breath slipping away like smoke.

Coda, his virtual assistant, answers. The posh voice seems to come from all around.

"Cynthia's aware you're here."

"Is she ... still aware this is a simulation?"

"Local run time exceeds two years. That's well beyond human capacity to retain awareness of life outside simulation."

Matthew remembers heated arguments back in the real world. She'd been spending more and more time in this carefully constructed dream. He had grown worried about her state of mind. Last month, she'd checked into a long-term facility.

As frustrated as he was, he didn't blame her. The latest simulation updates let you go anywhere. Be anyone. She'd chosen to go back to a time when they'd still had a son.

The front door is unlocked and he opens it to a smell of food cooking and a warmth that settles around his shoulders. A younger man's face stares back from the old brass-framed mirror.

"What's that all about?" he asks.

"In this simulation you're only 33 years old," answers Coda.

Music spills along the hallway leading past the living room. Even in the darkness he recognizes the way the furniture is set out. He walks across the soft carpet, flinching at something sharp beneath his feet. He lifts a Lego piece.

"How can such a little thing be so painful?" he says, considering it.

Why does it even have to hurt at all?

"This simulation is a fully immersive replication of the real world," says Coda.

The smell coming from the kitchen is delicious and he's astounded to feel his tummy rumbling. Is

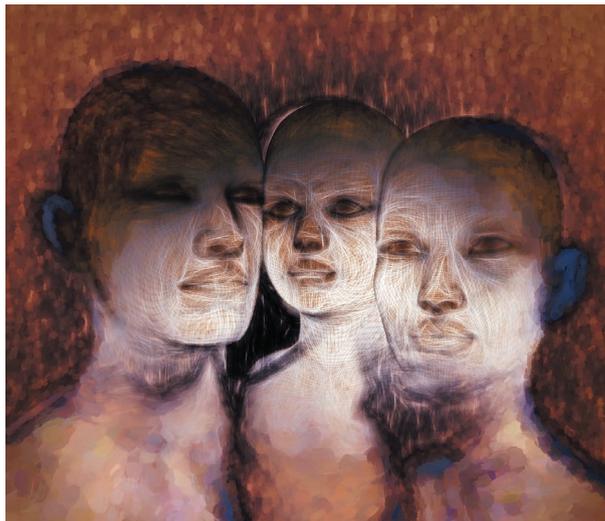


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Cynthia expecting him to have returned from work like he had done so many times before?

As he paces ahead, he sees a brief flash of his wife moving to the fridge. She leans in, hidden by the white door covered in magnets and drawings. Her hair is long, almost halfway down her back.

A pot simmers quietly on the stove and three large candles flicker on the table. Cynthia moves back to work-top by the window, her face reflected against the night. She starts cutting shallots, transferring them to a glass bowl. She takes a whisk and stirs.

She turns and notices him.

"Hello love," she smiles. "How was the flight?"

Matthew opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out. Golden light dances in her eyes.

"What's up?" she asks.

Does she know?

Coda's voice echoes in his head. "It would seem she's fully bound into this simulation."

"I'm fine," says Matthew, putting on a smile. "Just ... a long journey. How are you?"

"Oh fine. We've had so much snow. Owen and I went sledding."

Matthew's heart skips a beat and he imagines that somewhere across a vast distance, his real heart has also leapt in his slumbering body.

He places his young hands around the frame of a chair. "Cynthia, love. I ... We ..."

She looks at him, then dips her finger into the bowl and tastes it, then squeezes some lemon in.

"Darling, could you get the blender please? It's in the cupboard by the stairs."

Matthew hesitates, then nods. He whispers quietly, going through the words. How to tell her that she's stuck in a dream. That this isn't real. She needs to recognize it and then they need to go back, as hard as that might be.

He reaches the cupboard door and remembers to push the old brass handle in before turning. The hinges squeak as it opens and he wonders if the WD-40 is in the same place in the garage.

Matthew heads back to the kitchen but a sound makes him pause. Down the hallway some light spills out of a long-silenced room.

Goosebumps creep up his arms as he listens to quiet noises. It's all too real and he places the blender on the carpet, worried he might drop it. The door to Owen's room stands open.

Inside, his son sits within a circle of stuffed toys, holding a large plastic teapot.

"One for you Miss Moo, and you too!"

Matthew's son is pretending to pour tea from the pot into the cups in front of the stuffies. Big bright eyes shine over unbroken grins.

Owen stands up, tottering around on little feet. He's as Matthew remembers. That same brown hair with a touch of red. This is the way Owen would always be out in the real world. A memory of a life cut short.

"Daddy!" says Owen with a smile. "You're back!"

Matthew nods and tries to speak but nothing comes out. At the edge of his mind there's a voice, but it's soft and torn, as if coming from impossibly far away.

"Daddy, I went down the big hill!"

"Woah, cool," says Matthew as he imagines new days ahead.

As Owen tells him about the snowman he made and how mummy makes the best hot chocolate, Matthew gazes out the window. Big snowflakes tumble slowly, glimmering orange beneath a streetlight. Beyond them, a world is coiled tight, bound with stories yet to be written.

"Daddy, can we go sledding tomorrow?"

Cynthia walks into the room and places one hand on Matthew's shoulder. She leans in to kiss his cheek.

"It's good to have you home," she says. ■

Paul Alex Gray enjoys writing linear and interactive fiction that cuts a jagged line to a magical real world. His work has been published in *Spelk*, *365 Tomorrows* and *Empyreome*.