

Happy

The room is buzzing. People all around dance to the song that plays, many line the walls, standing and drinking; the bar is crowded. The lights multi-coloured beams douse the dancers in a cascading fluorescence, changing and morphing to the music.

The girl dances in my arms, her long hair grazing my forearm. She moves so beautifully, I cradle her; the back of her head smells sweet. As I watch her backside move under the neon light, I start to feel something in my chest.

A strange feeling, one I haven't felt in a long time. Our bodies move together like cogs in a machine, mirroring one another - instinctive coordination.

The strap of her top begins to fall off of her shoulder; a thin sheen of sweat on her soft skin makes it slip.

As I reach to put it back, I lightly caress her softness.

She turns to me then, her body still moving to the beat of the music; her hair flies, as she turns to face me.

"Welcome back, sir,"

A woman in a white uniform says to me as she helps me up, my eyes too blurry to make out any details. "Were you satisfied with our services today?"

"That was way shorter than last time," I say standing now, my vision coming back - and I'm getting angry. "I didn't even get to see her face!"

"I'm sorry sir," a man in the same uniform says, wearily walking towards me. "We have no control over how the overall experience is."

"When the simulation starts and stops is all based on you, all we do is monitor you," the woman adds, trying to calm down. This only makes me angrier.

"It's up to the machine and your mind." the man adds hastily, seeing my reaction, as the woman puts a hand on my shoulder reassuringly.

"I want to go back in. Now!" I say, flinging away the useless sim cap.

"You know we can't let you do that sir," the man says, there is a different air to him now: aggressive, reproachful. "We're going to have to ask you to leave now, please."

"Alright, alright. Shit. I'll go," I say, taking a last swing at the room, knocking over some piece of equipment; it clatters to the ground.

I leave the simulation station and walk around the city - the artificial dusk confuses my newly conscious eyes for a second. I look up at the city above me, taking time to adjust.

The rings of steel and glass and artificial gravity that separate me from them, them from me, amazes me as it begins to glow.

I start to think about the girl from the simulation - about how I never saw her face, yet I feel attached to her somehow. I head down towards the main courtyard, in close proximity to my housing unit.

There's a bar on the corner right before you enter the courtyard; its lights catch my attention as I walk past. What can a drink hurt? I think to myself as I go inside.

The bar's a small, dingy place that mimics that of old Earth, looking like what one would call a 'dive bar'. Old game tables stand in many rows in the middle of the floor, their green fabric tops covered in strangely coloured adornments, arranged in a triangle pattern.

I never understood Earth customs. I sit down at the bar and order a plain drink, "Nothing fancy." This is not the place for that.

I start to think about her again, the girl from the simulation. I know that she isn't real, but I can't help feeling something for her.

I need to see her. I need to see her face, look into her eyes.

Soon, I'm stumbling back up the street.

I go home to try and sleep, but my mind is racing as I lay in bed. I have to go back there, to see her face. Before I leave I put on my jacket, grabbing my piece from the bottom drawer.

The city wraps around above my head as I walk. The lights spiralling in every direction as cars move around other sectors, the stars slightly visible through all the layers of metal and glass.

I've become violent in my disillusion, nothing seems real to me. All I can think about is the girl. The cold, artificial wind of winter is biting at my face - I'm glad I remember to bring my jacket.

I have to go back into the simulation. I need to see her. I reach the station, the lights are still on and to my relief the open sign is still illuminated. I stumbled in. The front hall is dark - darker than it was earlier.

"You're back again sir," the woman from earlier says as she comes to greet me, turning on the light.

"Yeah"

"I have to go back in."

"Alright, sir," the girl says somewhat nervously, taking my coat in her slightly-shaking hands.

"This way."

She leads me to the same room as before, a simple room, with the walls covered in cold metal sheets - except for a wall of mirrored glass that's beside the simulator. The floor is metal too; it's like a cell. There are instruments and wires and pieces of tech lying around the floor, for some reason that is beyond my knowledge. In the middle of the room lies the simulator. It's a somewhat underwhelming machine, as what looks like an oval-shaped box wrapped in plastic and metal. The inside is empty, except for a seat and thousands of small wires.

The technicians get me to change out of my clothes, and into a sim cap.

"Please sit back and relax, sir," the woman says shakily as she places the sim cap on my head. I sit back as the doors of the simulator close, and I start to fade.

The sun is blistering on my skin.

The wide brim of my hat is the only thing protecting my face from the blistering sun. I ride the horse slowly through the town strip.

Hand on my revolver, I'm careful not to draw too much attention to myself.

I tie my ride on the post outside the town saloon, and go inside.

There's a large crowd already drinking as I walk in, although it can't be past noon. The women are scattered around throughout the crowd, their exposed legs showing off just enough of their merchandise. One girl stands in the middle of the room, with her back to me - she seems younger than the rest.

Her dark hair falls past her waist, long curls at the ends. It's her.

I know it is. I think to myself as I start to walk toward her, making my way across the crowded room, my heart racing.

Before I reach her, she walks behind the bar and through the door behind it. I stand in the middle of the room for a beat, attempting to compose myself. Anger overwhelms me

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Suddenly the saloon doors fly open. A bandit gang barges in, guns blazing; the women start to scream. "Alright every 'ne get on the ground!" The first man fires off two shots, silence follows as the room moves to the floor.

"Y'all 're gonna give us your money," a second man says to the silent bar, "and none of y'all 're bonn' die. Hold out on us, and we gonn' know, and you's gonn' die."

At this a woman gets up and starts to run, crying, as she makes her way to the door.

Her head explodes as the gun goes off.

"That's the first! Y'all see what happens t' runners." The leader of the group walks in, his hat tipped to hide his face. His gun is still smoking from the round shot into the woman's head.

I try to get control of myself, get control of my anger. It's blinding me, taking cover in my mind like this gang taking over the saloon.

I close my eyes, and breath deeply, hoping for the anger to dissipate, as another gun goes off.

I open my eyes to see the front of the gang leader's shirt ripped open, a red stain spreading rapidly where the bullet hit him square in the chest - a man in the middle of the room is standing, the barrel of his gun smoking.

The saloon erupts into chaos, guns firing, women screaming - I hide beneath the nearest table, and watch the scene unfold.

The sheriff comes in, ahead of his lawmen, "Y'ALL BETTER STO-" and is immediately shot, his blood running into the dirt road outside. The room is wild; all the customers hide under tables or fire random shots into the air, dodging lawman and outlaw bullets alike - the women cower together in a corner behind the door.

"Come with me." a voice says from behind me, as long, brown hair brushes past my face. It's her, I think to myself as I come out from under the table.

The girl grabs my hand and runs low to the ground, slowly moving towards the now-broken door. She bends down over a dead body, picking up the man's gun.

She points to the dead man's overturned table "Let's take cover behind there!" She begins to take aim at the nearest outlaw. She breathes deeply, taking aim - I see her back grow and then contract as she exhales.

"When I hit him, you run," she says, her back still to me. "On my count! One...." She takes another deep breath, steadying herself. "Two... Thr-"

Her body falls to the ground with a loud bang as a bullet passes through her temple; she falls flat on her face, a pool of blood starts to grow under her dark, curled hair.

"Welcome back, sir." the woman says to me again. I feel like I'm having deja-vu.

My head is spinning as I get up, and I feel much weaker than I usually do after coming-to.

"I need to go back," I say, making my way back towards the simulator.

"We can't let you do that, sir. It isn't safe." the male technician says as he comes out from behind the wall of mirrors adjacent to the simulator.

"I have to," I say again, voice cracking, as I step closer to them - I feel my nose start to bleed.

"No." the man says. "We'll have to ask you to leave now, sir." The woman holds out my clothes in her hand, now nicely folded, as though she is begging me to take them.

As I take them, I see my jacket hanging on the wall beside me, and remember.

I drop the clothes and manage to grab the gun from the inside pocket.

I aim the gun at him first, then at her. "Let me back in," I say desperately now.

"I have to see her. I have to see her face!"

"Sir," the woman says, her voice shaking as silent tears roll down her cheeks. "We can't."

"It'll kill you!" the man exclaims, his arms extended, hands shaking - his eyes pleading with me to stop.

"Put me back!" I scream as I shoot him in the arm; his pathetic body crumples as he falls to the floor.

She screams, and I grab her, pulling her along with me as I walk back towards the simulator.

I see myself in the wall of mirrors, I barely recognize myself; there's murder in my eyes and a stream of blood running from my nose.

I sit back down in the machine, my hands shaking now as I aim the gun at the young woman.

"Do it," I say, and I drop the gun as the simulator doors close.

We're running through the snowy forest, the freezing wind in our faces.

We fall together, our hands together, but we get up quickly.

We fear the men behind us, their angry screams chasing us through the cold. We hear them in the distance as they follow us, their gunshots audible over even the howling winds.

We duck behind a tree, catching our breath, which floats thickly through the frigid air.

They shoot at us again; it's closer than before - we see flashes of light through the snow, blinding us.

Their sounds echo through the empty space between the trees as we start to run again, faster than before.

I can feel my heart thumping in my chest as we run, the snow crunching beneath our tired feet. The trees blur as we go, the voices of the men behind us getting quieter.

There's a distant shot and suddenly I feel a sharp pain in my chest. She screams as my vision blurs, and I fall to the ground, the white snow around me slowly starts to turn pink, then red.

I can hardly hear her crying now, her tears melting the snow.

"Go," I tell her, reaching out to touch her hair. "You can make it."

"No!" she says through sobs. "I'm not leaving you."

"You have to," I say as my hands fall to the ground again; I can't hold it up anymore.

She leans over me as my vision starts to fade, and I see her for the first time. Her eyes are so blue, her cheeks full and loving, the tears making them glow red with the cold.

She smiles a sad, beautiful smile as she looks at my dying face, her eyes meeting mine.

And then she is gone, I can hear her footsteps in the snow, getting farther and farther away - her heavy breathing fades as she goes.

My vision goes black men reach me; I do not see their faces. The world is black. And then I am gone.

"We told him he couldn't survive it, officer. His brain was overloaded. The human mind can't handle that amount of neurological stimulation in such a short amount of time." The female technician tells the police as they arrive on the scene, her colleague now bandaged and being taken to hospital.

The dead man still sits on the simulator; his nose run dry, blood and tears cover his naked corpse - the last thing he will ever wear.

But there is an eeriness to the dead man; he wears a smile.

A content corpse is off-putting to the men moving the body to the airlock.

They feel relief to see it go as it is whooshed out into space through the outer door - sent away forever to float in the infinite cosmos, a single body in the vacuum of space. Alone. Dead. Happy.