

## No Escape

Emma's come to visit, and she's worrying me.

I've always thought myself left-leaning, but Emma insists I'm conservative. She lives by herself in a dingy old apartment making a tad over minimum wage as a litigator. I worry she's becoming a bit detached from reality. She might say that I'm just behind on the times, or that I simply don't understand her generation, but I just can't make sense of what's been happening to her these last few years. I feel as though every time she comes to visit, she's grown more distant from the world. More like her father.

She looks comfortable enough, though, sitting on the faux leather sofa across the living room from me, sipping at her Diet Coke, curled up in my weighted blanket. Yes, she's very cozy there, though you might not think it by the way her gaze keeps dancing around the pale green wallpaper behind me. She almost looks nervous. Andy quickly dropped by last weekend, just to help redo the living room walls. I haven't put any pictures back up, but Emma is still jumping around the empty green walls with her erratic gaze. Has she lost her mind? It might certainly seem that way to someone even more behind the times than me.

"What're you lookin' at Emma?" Her eyes—bright purple where they were once a dull blue—refocus from the wall onto my own eyes. Bright windows pop up in her pupils and hover over the surface of her eyes.

“Responding to e-mails, organizing folders, chatting with friends. Usual stuff.” She breaks eye contact, shifting her gaze around the wall more, moving windows and text and data along the surface of her eyes.

“All at once?” The dancing lights on her eyes recede back into her pupils again as she focuses her gaze on me again.

“Yeah. Becomes second nature once you use The Sight enough.” She sips the last of her soda, then sets the empty can down on the solid oak table between us. “You should get a set. You’re living in the aughties with that old phone of yours.” Her eyes start to mechanically jump around again, immersed in some virtual world that I’m too conservative to be a part of.

“Emma sweetie, don’t you worry that these things—The Sight, these smartlenses or whatever they’re called, and those smartglasses you used to have, and now all this alternate reality—”

“Augmented reality.”

“Right, augmented reality—don’t you worry that it could suck you into some virtual world? Or distort your brain? Sometimes it seems like we have such a connection, but other times it’s hard to tell where you end and where all these gadgets begin.

From Emma’s alien perspective, a biometrics app pops into view as she looks back at her mother: Elevated heart rate, glossy stare, subtle frown, nervous tick in the left brow; 99.79% chance her mom is genuinely concerned for her security; quickly fix-gaze to workspace left-center, pull up the Contra app in new frame, auto-generate optimal reply on-lens; total processing time for read/reply operation, 1.48 seconds.

“I’m in the same reality as you Ma, mine just has more features.”

I don’t want to start another debate with Emma’s Contra app—it’s successfully held her’s and her clients’ hands through thousands of legal proceedings. Nor do I want to suffer another few seconds of haunting silence while that thing tells her what to do next. So, I divert my attention to a different motherly pursuit.

“Well dear, if you say you’re okay then I guess I have to believe you. Can I get you another Diet Coke?” I see her Contra app guide her eyes through another one of those creepy readings, but this time it must have generated a more passive reply for her.

“Sure, I’ll have another Diet Coke,” Contra says through her.

“Another Diet Coke it is,” I exclaim, happy for a brief break from her ghostly stare. From the kitchen, I call back to her: “Say, what time do you have to leave for your flight?”

“Six.”

“Would you like to have dinner here before you go?” I open the fridge door and grab one of the cans of Diet Coke from the bottom shelf.

“No thanks. I’ll just have something at the airport.”

I walk back to the living room, swap out the empty can on the coaster in front of Emma for the full one, then walk back to the kitchen to fix a tea for myself. I pick the electric kettle up off its base, open the lid, and fill it with water from the sink. “You know Ma,” Emma starts as I stop the water, “you’re just as mechanical as me in some ways.”

“How so?” I call back to the living room as I place the kettle back on its base and push the ON button.

“Ever since Dad left, you just go through your daily routine without any passion. You shower, go to the hospital, work, get back, make food, stream vids. You’re like a zombie sometimes.” I pace over the cupboards to find a mug amidst the shelves filled with old glassware from a different time in my life. Most of it hasn’t been used in years. I can’t deny my loneliness as of late. With Emma off becoming something of a woman, and now with Andy saying he doesn’t feel romantically connected with me anymore, the house is just an empty shell of what it once was.

“I get this vibe like you feel totally alienated from the world,” Emma continues. “You should get a pet or something. Or find some new shows to watch, sometimes a little escapism is healthy, y’know?” I reach into my tea cupboard and pick out one of the boxes. Orange

pekoe—the usual. Tear it open, turn back to the counter, think about what it would be like having a dog or cat around as I plop the teabag down in the mug.

“Emma, is that your personal assessment, or did you get that from your Sight?”

“A bit of both.”

My first thought is that if the Emma says it, who am I to disagree? But what could her gadgets possibly know about me that she doesn’t know? But maybe that’s just my conservative bent talking—these gadgets do have tons of data flowing through them. Maybe Emma’s right. Maybe I should be more open-minded. “Well, if you and your Sight both say it, who am I to disagree?”

I slide open the window above the sink to get some fresh morning air into the room, but all that comes in is the burnt stench of smog. A faint waft of the pine trees in the backyard floats in with the smog, but it’s not much—my yard is one of the few green spaces left in the neighborhood. Beyond the pines, I can make out the shape of the Hoffman’s house—they recently painted it all white, a total eyesore. Emma says the house is covered in a gorgeous virtual overlay, and that the white paint makes the overlay look more crisp, but that’s a world that I’m not a part of. To those with The Sight, I’m sure the Hoffman’s house is virtually a palace, but to me, it’s just a bad design choice.

Emma tells me that Andy’s new apartment is following the same design trend—New Réal, she called it. White walls with nothing hung on them, sparsely placed furniture, no monitors or screens or decorations, all to leave room for virtual windows, virtual interfaces, virtual art, virtual bookshelves, virtual living. Sure, it’s cost-efficient without sacrificing style, but if you didn’t have access to The Sight, you would think all the world started living in a madhouse. Thoughts like that make me less concerned for Emma and more concerned for everyone else.

“Ma,” Emma’s voice snaps me back into reality, “I just got some new design apps, I’m gonna re-decorate your place a little.”

“That would be nice,” I laugh at the thought of my home being adorned with decorations I can’t see. “Maybe I’ll have more people from work over, they might appreciate the effort and come back more often.”

On the surface of Emma’s eyes, a frame titled “Stylr” pops open and consumes her field of vision. The app’s AI scans through all the data it can find about her mom’s interior design preferences, then gets to work. Stylr coats the living room walls with floral wallpaper, hangs interactive art of woodland creatures and landscapes on walls, embeds selection of virtual board games into the table, embeds a virtual bookshelf filled with e-books beside her actual bookshelf. Emma fixes her gaze to right-bottom, InSight app opens, eyes hover over “Add comment” button, pull up on-lens keyboard—Emma pauses—someone has already left comments all over the room. The InSight overlay shows text, images, video all carefully scattered throughout the room.

“Was Dad wearing his e-glasses when he came over to help you?”

“Oh yes, he always wears them when he works.”

“Well, he must use InSight too—I think he left all kinds of presents for us in here. There’s a video on the rug of my first steps on it. There’s an image library of all the games we played at the table, some comments about his memories of watching TV with us where the TV used to be. Do you want to see? I’ll take my lenses out for you.”

Andy has always been a sentimental type. It wasn’t a messy separation, just an unsentimental one on his part. His numbness hurt me more than anything, not to mention his lack of care for mine and Emma’s feelings. But I understand why he felt like he had to numb himself during the separation. A lot of living went on in this house. I’m not too surprised that he still has fond memories of this house. We cherish many of the same memories, so I can’t blame him for wanting to immortalize those memories in some alien, virtual space. Have I just been going through the motions of my own virtual world, desperately trying to pretend the house is as it always was?

Maybe Emma’s right—maybe I’m the real robot here. Maybe I should go into the living room and try Emma’s Sight, see the world through the perspective of her and Andy. Maybe

it's time to try solving my problems instead of running from them. Andy's right. Emma's right. I need to escape from this solitude and rejoin the outside world. Maybe I'm becoming more progressive, or maybe I've always been more progressive than she's given me credit for.

The sound of bubbling water catches my attention, and a loud mechanical click flicks the kettle back into the 'OFF' position.

"I'll be there in a minute, Emma."

As I fetch a packet of sweetener for the tea, I remember Emma's first steps in the living room. The memory is hazier than it used to be. Time and depression will do that to you. Like the rest of the house, it somehow lacks the vivid color or depth that it once had, yet, the I still feel the same sense of pride, hope, joy whenever I think back to it. Would that memory still have the same emotional depth if it became something as mundane as a VR video? Or would it have less power if it were just another fixture of the living room? Would I begin to identify Andy's recorded memories as my own? I stir the sweetener into the tea as I mull over the possibilities.

"Whoa, even the kitchen has old photos embedded into it. This stuff—this stuff could stay here even after the house is gone, as long as people are still using VR." Emma slowly shuffles into the kitchen, gazing around the room in bewilderment like it was Christmas morning of '13 all over again. Surely Andy left video of that morning in the living room, too. Her eyes gleam with a mixture of wonder and virtual light and her smile spans cheek to cheek, the most beautiful spectacle I've seen in ages. She gently plucks the thin, purple lenses out of her blue eyes, lights still dancing around like soft sparks on their surface as she holds them out in her palm.

"You really should put them in for a look," she offers, extending her hand to me. "Don't worry, they're waterproof," she quips. "Just in case you need to cry." At least she's still able to read me even without The Sight.

I take a sip of the tea, then set the mug down on the table. Instinct tells me to conserve my own window into reality, to preserve the purity of my own memories. But reason tells me I have nothing to lose that hasn't already been left behind. I smile back at Emma and pick the lenses out of her palm.