

Today, I was someone that she could talk to. Our roles had reversed.

Her address was forever burned into my heart: a URL I remembered so well. Those golden letters always bought me hope as I plugged in, and still I held hope for our final visit. I arrived on the landing, a hallway fat with sunshine's lifeblood – a tiny window at the end of the corridor showed me the promise of a perfect world outside. Birdsong looped pleasantly in my ears; the feed hadn't changed with time. Knock at the door with soft knuckles kissing the wood. A simple gift ready in my other hand.

She appeared in the frame and all my memories of her pressed flat and aligned into the present. The swirling vortexal blond in her white shell suit. Friend and guide. Soft eyes that showed me inside and told me I was always welcome. And a voice just a little cautious, but a sound that drew my heart in closer. Fifteen years ago, and fifteen years later, I rejoiced to hear her say:

"It's good to see you again."

"Bought you something this time."

I handed her the gift as we made our way through the single room. She's been painting. Oh, so many paintings. Her room was designed without particular consideration for how she would actually live in such a small space. Rather, this room and that balcony beyond the glass were for the receiver, the end user. All you need to see when visiting a self help V.I. is the avatar herself and maybe some nice scenery to look at and calm your fractured nerves as problems one through seven flood out. See, beyond that paper wall there – nothing. Not a thing. Darkness, perhaps. Void, most likely. So on the interior, she hung her paintings to patch up the outside.

See: a forest, a starscape. A city, a friend. The ocean, the heavens. Oily and so fresh. Not an inch of walls-space was left untouched; her latest creation stood over by the balcony and I was surprised to see a self-portrait on the canvas.

My gift will come in handy, then. V.I popped the holoseals and revealed the little rolls of paint inside all lined up like ready batteries. Her face broke into a smile and her eyes were lost for a moment. She turned to me and said, "You know, it's surprising how much white paint you end up needing."

"Looks like I should have brought over more." I smiled and motioned to the self-portrait, "Never seen you paint yourself before."

V.I. closed the box and placed it delicately onto her table (covered in sketches of the moon) and hugged her arms, replied gently, "After a while, I got bored of painting things I saw outside."

We moved outside to the balcony and sat with our legs pushed up against the safety glass. She sat beside me with her arms spread out, supporting her weight as she leaned back and looked out to her city. I'm afraid to say that I'd seen it in better shape; nature had taken hold when all activity ceased. A quirk of the ambient programming, maybe, but all of these skyscrapers with vines growing from their eye sockets, the ghostly pall of inactivity...yes, this place had seen better days. This is what happens when you abandon a program, though.

V.I. explains with her hands, "They're rezoning the entire district. From here down to the lake, all of these buildings - gone. So that means my time here will come to an end."

"That's how they broke the news to you?"

"More or less. You know, it's kind of funny. I used to be the one who could break bad news without even feeling a thing. Having it happen to you feels very different," and V.I. laughed once, sad.

I asked her a particularly difficult question then. "What does it feel like, knowing that you've been abandoned and now someone's finally going to shut you down?"

"I get closure, but...I'd rather be doing what it is I'm designed to do."

"So, why the painting, then? Coping mechanism?"

V.I. joked, "I've got the modules in psychiatry, not you." But soon she settled down and answered, "One of the best therapies I delivered was to get my users to paint. You'd be surprised just how good people can get when they dedicate their minds to something creative. Having a positive focus on anything is so important. So...I guess you can liken my painting to a doctor following her own advice. But can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

The sunlight moved and her face lit up in the beam of God. Her words came out deliberate and slow, "You don't need my help anymore, so why did you come back?"

I drummed my fingers on my knee, trying to chase down those words I had prepared in my mind. They came out like this: "Do you know what 'reify' means?"

“To believe in something, and in doing so, grounding that very same thing in existence.”

“That’s it. I don’t believe it’s right that you should be erased and forgotten after helping so many people, after helping me.”

V.I. turned to me with quiet eyes and said, “Are you going to save me? I’m grounded here, in this place, in this code. My IP is still tied with the company; I can’t leave, you can’t make a copy of me...unless you’ve developed some blackstage techniques over the years...”

“Hm, almost.” I stood up and draped an arm over the railing, raised the other to my head, pointed, said, “I’m keeping you up here. Call it a soft-copy. But I want to do something better.”

And I brought out the nanode cyler from my breast pocket. She lit up in my palm and sent out thousands of tiny droid trickles into the air like a slowmotion glass fracture. As the creatures began to scan and copy the world, bit by bit, V.I. became spooked, whispered, “They’ll know.”

“They won’t. Nobody’s checked the server logs in years.” And I parrot her own words, “You need to trust me. I’m not someone who’s going to give up on you.”

V.I. nods, her smile cracked with the fear, the thrill of breaking the law as the nanodes make a copy of her world. She asks, hands on her heart, “Why?”

The nanode cyler in my palm whirred and purred, beeped: 50% complete. Yes, this is going well. I smiled and sighed, said, “Because I I-“

And the world collapsed. V.I. shimmered in the air like a glitchy heat mirage and then...she was lost. The city beside me crumbled down in fast-motion demolition and I was flung from the apartment. Rough and tumbling through the ether with hard spikes of data battering my body. I came to in the plugseat with blood trickling through my teeth and staining my transfer suit. It felt like I’d been run over by a dozer; quickly, I unhooked my feeds from the seat and lurched through the darkness of home.

Was I sloppy, had they found us? Maybe not. I’d have a bullet through my head if that were the case...

By the main terminal in the kitchen I saw the nanode cyler chirping away with a line plugged into the chair. 75% complete. I slammed a fist into the kitchen top; the LSD brewer came alive and asked me whether I’d like to calm my nerves with a little spice. I told it to fuck off. It told me to relax.

Hands in head, resting over the counter, feeling the sting of teeth wriggling in gums, bones shifting – the after-effects of hard plugout.

I turned to the balcony, seeking solace in the Metropolis, instead finding the silhouette of the painting we'd done together, hanging there by the glassy wall.

I sniffed deep. And let myself cry.

I had 75% of the code needed to get into the Side of the Palace.

I had 75% left of the mind of a dear friend. Someone I loved. Someone who had saved me, even if I had never been able to save her.