

FORTY-EIGHT MINUTES AT THE TRAINVIEW CAFÉ

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M. Bennardo often dreams of train travel, layovers, and quiet pointless moments. His work has recently appeared in *Analog*, *Kaleidotrope*, and the *Noir Fire* anthology from The Future Fire Press. The author lives in Kent, Ohio.

Just twenty minutes after he had arrived at the Trainview Café, Felix was back out on the station platform. He walked along its length, holding a cup of tea that he had purchased at the café, looking up and down the empty tracks, searching in vain for some way to call another train to take him away again.

The bustling people were gone, too, all either inside the station or spirited away on the last train a few minutes earlier. Now there was nothing of interest on the platform: no train, no call button, and nothing else.

Or at least nothing beyond the pop-pop-pop of an invisible woodpecker in the pine trees across the tracks, nothing beyond the cool pattering of a misty drizzle in Felix's hair and across his exposed forearms, and nothing beyond the astringent burn of the hot tea in his mouth.

Closing his eyes, Felix took a sip of the tea, held it in his mouth, and felt its warmth diffuse through his sinuses. It was an incredible detail, just like every other detail in the place. The feeling of physical presence, of reality, of existential weight. He could not deny that the Trainview Café was utterly unlike any other simulation program he had experienced in the decades since he had left his own human body behind. But all the same, Felix couldn't see what all of these finely turned details added up to. What was the point, except to remind him of what he no longer was?

Slowly, Felix inverted the paper cup over the edge of the platform. Steam rose hissing as the remaining tea splattered onto the gravel below, staining it dark gray. He squashed the paper cup and threw it down onto the tracks, wondering how much longer he had to wait before he would be disconnected. He vaguely recalled that the program had charged him for forty-eight minutes. It was an unusual increment of time, but it had been the only one available. And it had been expensive, too: more expensive than twelve hours in most other high-end simulations. Yet, here he was, only twenty minutes in and already bored.

Felix crouched at the edge of the platform, and then dropped down to the railbed

below, wincing as his feet hit the loose gravel harder than expected. He could feel individual stones poking through the too-thin soles of his shoes, and as he shifted his weight and took a few wobbly steps he quickly realized that each individual rock was its own discrete object. He'd expected the gravel to be a texture, but it clearly wasn't. As far as Felix could tell, someone had taken the trouble to render every piece of gravel in the bed, which was just as deep and wide and long as it appeared from the platform. Hundreds of feet long, at least, and maybe longer. Who knew how far it went? Miles? Forever?

Yet, there was seemingly no quest here. No puzzle, no riddle, no drama, no story, and no bigger world beyond the station. Felix had already tried to exit by the station's main doors, and the program had prevented him from opening them. Clearly there was nothing outside that way. So now he picked out the black scarecrow of a railway signal about two hundred yards down the railbed. He'd see how far he could get that way. That could be his mission for the next twenty minutes or so.

But less than halfway to the signal arm, he found himself blocked again. There was no barrier, physical or otherwise. There was just an inability to proceed, such as Felix had encountered countless times before at the edges of other simulations. Here, again, he had reached the end of the world.

So this is what he had paid that exorbitant rate to experience: a train station, a small café, a hundred yards of track, and nothing else. Felix shook his head one last time and turned around, heading back toward the station platform. After he had walked about twenty yards, he stopped. Then he laid down on his back across the rails, folded his hands across his middle, and stared up into the falling rain as he waited for the next train to arrive.

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Only a few minutes later, Felix's view of the low gray sky was interrupted by the face of a woman standing over him. She peered down and frowned, a blue and white umbrella hovering over her head now blocking the drizzle from further wetting Felix's face.

"Do you mind getting off the tracks?" asked the woman. "This is a very upsetting way to behave."

Felix blinked a few times and wiped the rainwater from his eyes, snapping to focus on the woman's face. He wondered if she were a paying user, like himself, or merely an active sprite programmed to discourage him from doing exactly what he was doing now.

"Are you listening?" asked the woman when Felix didn't answer. "I asked you to get off the tracks. Another train will be coming soon."

Felix considered his options. This was the most interesting thing to have happened to him yet at the Trainview Café. Apart from the barista at the café, hardly anybody else in the simulation had even appeared to notice that he existed. He had seen dozens and dozens of people, exiting and entering trains, standing in line at the café, sitting on benches, reading newspapers, watching the board that announced departures and arrivals. But, to a person, they had all simply ignored him. Certainly no one else had taken the initiative to talk to him. Felix's simulated pulse actually quickened slightly. Could he finally be doing something right? By laying down on the tracks, he'd gotten the program to respond to his presence.

"Let the train come," said Felix. "I've circumnavigated the entire world so far as I can tell, and there doesn't seem to be anything else left to do."

The woman furrowed her brow, raindrops from the edges of her umbrella spattering Felix as she shook her head disapprovingly. "If you'd like to leave, you're welcome to wait on the platform and get on the next train. All you're doing here is ruining the simulation for everyone else."

Felix didn't try to hide his surprise. Everyone else? He hadn't imagined for a moment that any of the dozens of other people in the simulation could possibly be paying users. They'd felt more like environmental sprites, mere background filler intent on their own dull pre-programmed business. Certainly there was none of the unpredictable boundary-testing behavior he expected from human users.

But before he could say anything, the woman spoke again in a commanding tone. "You have five seconds to get off the tracks or I'm disconnecting you."

For a moment, Felix considered staying where he was. Let her disconnect him! It was what he had wanted. And yet . . . now that the simulation seemed to be responding to him, Felix did vaguely want to see what would come next. So he pulled himself up to a sitting position, brushed off his pants with exaggerated care, and climbed to his feet.

"Happy now?" he asked. "Or is happiness not allowed here either?"

The woman didn't answer. As soon as Felix stood, she immediately turned and started walking back toward the platform. She walked so fast that Felix was forced to jog to catch up with her. As he did, a train suddenly thundered past. It was moving more slowly than Felix had expected, only about twice his own jogging speed, but with a terrible weight of momentum that made him shudder all the same. Had he really been lying down just a minute earlier, waiting for that to drive through him? He wondered queasily how far the realism of the simulation would have extended, and if he would actually have felt the wheels of the front car biting into his shoulders and calves.

"Happiness is allowed," said the woman as the whining of the train's brakes faded away. "But that's not usually what people come here looking for."

They had reached the edge of the station now, and the woman quickly shook out her umbrella and closed it up. Then she scrambled up a ladder to the main level of the platform. People were now thronging around the train in a claustrophobic press of bodies, both getting off and getting on with robotical focus. Felix kept close to the woman as she made her way through the surging crowd to the interior of the station. For several seconds, he felt sure he would lose her in the press.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he called as they emerged into an open space in the atrium. The woman turned and looked at him, seemingly surprised that he was still behind her. Felix felt himself blush. "I'm sorry I went out on the tracks."

The woman didn't say anything. She seemed to be studying his face, and then her eyes went blank for several seconds. Just as suddenly she seemed to return to awareness.

"You're Felix? You're new?" she asked. She said his name with a questioning air that didn't sound entirely friendly, but also not entirely hostile anymore. "Nobody met you, showed you around?"

"No," said Felix. "Nobody has yet."

"That's our mistake. For some reason, you didn't register as a new user. I'm Nancy. I'm the admin for this layover."

"I was here a few weeks ago," said Felix. "That might be why. But the program was glitching . . . I sat on the train for five minutes and it just kept going and going, rolling through the countryside. It never made it to the station. So I logged off and refunded the charge."

"Five minutes?" Nancy laughed. "How long do you think it should take for a train to reach a station?"

Felix felt his simulated cheeks blush again. The sensation surprised him every time. "For a real train, I guess it takes as long as it takes. But for a simulated train . . ." Felix shrugged. "You tell me."

Nancy softened slightly and brushed a strand of frizzy hair back from her face. "Fine. Since you're new, I'll show you around. But we don't call this place a simulation."

Felix shrugged, then gestured to the thronging crowd around them. "So what's everybody doing here? I gather that these are all paying users. But why?"

Nancy smiled thinly. Then she said gently: "They come in on a train, just like you did. They get off at the station, just like you did. The layover lasts forty-eight minutes, and they stay in the station and the café until it ends. Then they get on another train, and they leave again."

Felix grunted. "When you put it like that, it makes perfect sense."

Nancy shook her head, bright plastic earrings swinging on either side of her face. "You have to think differently about this place." Then she checked her watch. "Your outbound train is the next one. It arrives in twelve minutes, and you'll need to get on it. But that's enough time to show you one of the things I like to do when I'm here."

Nancy led Felix to a large window in a quiet corner of the train station, just beyond the eating tables of the café, and stood in front of it. There was nothing remarkable about the view outside the window: a small lawn, a few low bushes, and then more trees beyond. The only thing of any interest at all that Felix could see was a birdfeeder.

"Here it is," said Nancy.

She was actually smiling as she said it, as if she had brought him to some incredible wonder. Felix looked from Nancy's face to the window and back again.

"Look at them," she said, and this time she clearly motioned at the birdfeeder. There were two birds perched on it at the moment. One was little and brown, with a white streak across its head. The other Felix thought was a goldfinch. "Really look at the birds."

Felix tried. He furrowed his brow and concentrated. The goldfinch hopped on its perch and pecked at one of the openings in the feeder, extracting a sunflower seed with its beak. It promptly dropped the seed and fluttered down to the ground, chasing it. The other bird spread its own wings for balance as the hanging birdfeeder swayed slightly at the goldfinch's movements, steadying itself, then pecking at its own hole.

"Impressive," muttered Felix, but mostly because he wasn't sure what else to say.

"Each bird is fully rendered," said Nancy quietly. "Not quite down to the cellular level, but close. And they're persistent. They really exist, as much as anything can here. They have internal organs and arteries and blood and nerves, just like I'm sure you noticed your body does here. They need food and water and air. They can get sick. They can get tired. They lay eggs in the spring and they hatch young. They compete for food and fight for mates. They grow old. They die."

As Nancy spoke, a bluejay landed heavily on the birdfeeder, scattering the smaller birds with its aggressive approach. It fluffed its feathers and tried to hold on to the perch, too small and wet for its big claws.

"They never do the same thing twice," said Nancy. "These aren't looping animations. Each movement is a unique reaction to their environment, to their own needs, to each other. To our presence. Each of those birds makes decisions using its programmed instincts, the same way a real bird would. Practically speaking, at every level above the size of a cell, they are real birds."

Felix watched the bluejay continue to bully its way around the feeder as Nancy spoke. "But why?" he asked at last. "Why go to all that trouble? You must be using huge amounts of computing power just to keep these birds going. I've never heard of any other simulation doing anything like that."

Nancy shook her head at the word "simulation," then gestured to a dozen other people also clustered around the window, who were all watching the birds. "Have you ever watched the birds in the simulations you're used to? How long until they do something to break the illusion? After a few minutes they'd repeat their movements, or do something unnatural. But here, I can spend an entire layover just looking out this window, and I'm sorry when I have to go. The same is true of the ants in the

flowerpots, or the butterflies, or the leaves on a single tree. They're all different, all individual. They're all alive and real."

Felix was about to point out that none of those things had prevented him from losing interest and laying down on the tracks, but before he could speak, there came the hoot of a horn and a rushing roar from the platform.

"That's your train," Nancy said, putting a hand on Felix's shoulder and turning him gently toward the platform. "The one unbreakable rule we have is that you must make your connection. If you think you might ever want to come back, you'd better go now."

Felix looked through the station toward the platform, then back to the birdfeeder. Then his eyes glanced at Nancy. She motioned for him to go. And that was all it took. Finally: Felix had a mission, his heart hammering as he ran to catch his train.

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The next day, Felix arrived early. He still doubted that the Trainview Café could be worth its inflated price, but he had been feeling restless and bored with every other simulation he'd tried lately. At least the Trainview Café bored him in a different way.

As expected, he spawned on an inbound train. After his visit the day before, Nancy had written him a short message explaining how the Trainview Café worked. She had told him that trains could only arrive at the station at their scheduled times, so it might take up to sixteen minutes for the train he spawned on to reach the station. He wouldn't, however, be charged for the travel time. Instead, she suggested enjoying the free ride, however long it took.

Felix found himself in a window seat, so he started by peering outside. Brown-green countryside smeared past in a rapid blur. Here and there, he found he could focus on a house or a car waiting at a crossing, but it all rushed past so fast.

Slowly, he leaned his head against the window instead and let his forehead absorb the coolness of the glass and the vibrations of the train itself. He closed his eyes, and was surprised that he could feel the sinuous swaying of the train beneath him, shifting just an instant out of step with the rhythmic clacking of the wheels against the tracks. It was another surprising and fascinating detail, but like everything else in the simulation it didn't seem to add up to anything bigger.

So Felix pulled himself to his feet and started to explore the train. From the back of his car, he passed through a vestibule full of piled-up luggage, with a tiny bathroom behind a sliding door. The next car beyond was no different than the one he had spawned in. Moving farther on, Felix made his way through two more passenger cars and then a lounge car with a small snackbar selling soda, coffee, bags of chips, and pre-wrapped sandwiches. He paused for a moment, and dipped his hand in his pocket. There was a generous handful of change and a couple of bills, just as there had been the day before. If he wanted to eat, just for the experience of it, he could eat. But no: he had tried drinking tea already the day before. Today, he wanted to try something else.

The next car was the last one, and the door opened onto a stretch of track constantly receding behind the train. It wouldn't open, and neither would any of the windows in the car. As Felix tugged at them, someone approached him and touched his elbow gently.

"Sir, could you please take your seat while the train is in motion?"

Felix looked up in annoyance. Every time he started to explore a new area of the simulation, somebody came along to tell him to stop. How could they expect him to learn about the world if not through trial and error? Some of the errors might be mistakes, even fatal ones, but that was part of the fun. Yet, everyone here seemed to expect that he would just naturally know what was and wasn't allowed.

"I don't remember where my seat is," Felix answered in annoyance. "I don't even know if I have a ticket."

"You do," said the man. "But sit here for now, and please stay seated. We'll be at the station soon."

Felix sat brooding for three more minutes, but his mood did not improve as the train slowed and the familiar station building filled the view outside his window. He rose and exited the car, out onto the platform. It was a sunny day, and he stood for a few seconds, absorbing the warmth of the rays on his neck and hands. He had to admit that there were moments of real human sensation here . . . but he wished they also came along with something bigger to do.

Making his way through the station toward the big window, Felix joined a few others watching the birdfeeder. The goldfinch was back, hopping and fluttering about in a very convincing way. But Felix still knew it wasn't real, not really. The birds in other simulations were undeniably cruder, but a simulated bird didn't become real just because you fixed its glitches. Felix was keenly aware that his days of watching real birds had ended decades ago when he had left his body. His life was a simulation now.

Suddenly, Felix leaned forward and smacked loudly on the glass with the palm of his hand. The pane boomed in its frame, and the goldfinch immediately leapt away from the feeder in surprise and flew off at high speed. The others at the window all turned to Felix angrily.

"What did you do that for?" asked a woman.

Felix set his jaw. "I wanted to see what would happen."

"Well, that's what happens," said the woman. "What else would you expect?"

"It's not like I hurt it," said Felix. "Not that it could be hurt, not really . . ." It was on the tip of his tongue to add, *It's just a simulation*. But he could see the faces around him turning increasingly hostile. He let the words die on his tongue, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and walked away.

Out on the platform, Felix spied the man who had told him to sit down on the train. He was standing alone, drinking from one of the café's paper cups. Felix figured he might be an admin, like Nancy, so he drifted over to talk to him.

"Don't you get tired of the same old stuff?" asked Felix. "They should change up that café menu, put something new on it each day."

The man took a long sip from the cup and closed his eyes. "I'm not looking for anything new. Most people here aren't." Then he opened his eyes and turned them on Felix. "But then they don't bang on windows or try to jump out of moving trains either."

Felix held up his hands in mock apology. Someone must have reported his experiment at the birdfeeder already. Probably everyone at the window had done so. It wasn't a very nice crowd that hung around here, he thought to himself. When they weren't ignoring him, they were criticizing him. He was just trying to figure the place out.

"Where's Nancy?" Felix asked. "Is she here?"

The man looked away again and shrugged wordlessly.

"Another one of the admins," said Felix. "Big plastic earrings. She showed me around yesterday."

"Don't say that," said the man.

"Say what?"

"Admin, simulation, anything like that. You should know by now."

Felix gritted his teeth. "I know you know who I'm talking about."

"If you don't see Nancy in the station, then she isn't here. Now just let me be."

"Will she be on later?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. Most people come every day."

"I'll come back later then."

"Not today, you won't."

“Why? Are you banning me? For asking a question?”

“Nobody’s banning you. That’s just how it works. Everyone is permitted only one layover per day.”

Felix shook his head. “Fine. Tomorrow then. And as soon as the next train comes, I’m out of here.”

But the man didn’t say anything in reply. Instead, he just shut his eyes and took three breaths, deep and slow.

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Felix didn’t come back the next day, or the one after that, or the one after that. It was over a week until he even thought about the Trainview Café again. Instead, he climbed the Blue Crystal Glacier for the twentieth time.

The glacier had recently become Felix’s favorite simulation. He had grown impossibly tired of war simulations, dating simulations, strategy games, and the countless glorified interior decorating programs on offer. But the Blue Crystal Glacier, once he had found it, had been different.

The first thing that was different was that you were always alone. No matter how many people were in the program, you always started at the base of the mountain by yourself and you proceeded up to the ice field at the top alone. The climb took eight hours to complete at a moderate pace, and Felix had died and gotten lost and given up many times as he had learned the features of the mountain and how to master the technical climbing techniques that the ascent required.

The first time that Felix had reached the top, he had been elated. It had taken almost a hundred hours across many attempts, and he had felt a very rare and real sense of accomplishment. Making the final scramble up to the base of the glacier at the mountain’s peak had blown him away, almost literally. Feeling the wind rushing down from the ice field from off the tongue of blue ice had been thrilling and primal in a way that he had thought he would never feel again.

The Blue Crystal Glacier was better than anything else in any other simulation Felix had ever experienced, and he had loved it so much that he had climbed the mountain all the way to the top, again and again, twenty times over. But after so much repetition, the challenge had gone and the thrill had faded. He had found himself reduced to seeking out slightly more efficient routes, or attempting riskier jumps and scrambles. But the mountain was unforgiving, and he had died more and more often, in pursuit of quickly diminishing returns.

Shaving six minutes off his climb time did not give him even a fraction of the rush that the initial ascent had. And though the mountain was still a stunning creation to behold, on his most recent climbs Felix had felt a sinking feeling that he was slowly consuming it: that he was eating nearly every voxel that it had to offer, and that soon he would have eaten them all.

That, in fact, was what had brought him to the Trainview Café. He had been looking for something else like the Blue Crystal Glacier, and he had seen the Trainview Café suggested as another simulation with a similar sense of weight and reality. But it wasn’t the same at all. It was a completely different experience, and Felix didn’t know if it was one that he would ever learn to enjoy. But as he stood once more at the foot of the ice field and let the rushing wind pour past his face in a numbing roar, he realized he had few other options anymore.

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A couple of weeks later, Felix decided he could afford another trip to the Trainview Café. He had messaged Nancy to make sure that she would be in the program when he arrived, and had timed his spawning so that he would only have to sit on the train for a few minutes.

Even so, it was with mild surprise that Felix saw Nancy sitting in the same car, a

few rows in front of him, on the other side of the aisle. His instinct was to immediately get up and move next to her, but he fought it down. Instead, he settled back in his seat and waited for the train to reach the station. Felix had decided that he would try things their way this time. He'd follow the rules and play along, as best as he could.

As he exited to the platform, Felix tried to cast his memory back to the days when he had really been a commuter with a layover. He knew he had often had such moments during his life, so he was surprised how difficult it was to do. Had all those mundane human memories been wiped out of his mind, overwritten by thousands of simulated and heightened experiences? Or had he never bothered to record them in the first place, even as a human being?

Even so, Felix strolled into the terminal and checked the board for the time of the next train. Then he checked his own watch and made sure it matched the clock on the board. That felt familiar and right. He had an idea that he had always been a careful traveler, that this was what he would have done first of all.

But looking at his watch also reminded him how long he had to wait. Forty-eight minutes! It felt like such a long time to have nothing in particular to do. But was it really? Felix wished he could remember how he would have reacted to a similar layover in his old human life. Could it be that he would have welcomed it, or even enjoyed it? Could he have once found in real life what the others around him seemed to find in the Trainview Café now, in this simulation?

As Felix stood musing, he was suddenly aware that someone had approached him. It was Nancy. She nodded to him in welcome. "I was surprised to get your message. I honestly didn't think you'd come back again."

"I wasn't going to," admitted Felix. He wondered briefly if Nancy knew about his behavior on his second visit, but he decided it didn't really matter. He had acted badly perhaps, but he didn't think he had done anything really wrong. "I wanted to make sure I hadn't missed something. I think this place deserves another chance."

"And how does it look this time?"

"Maybe I understand a little better. Last time I was here, I kept thinking it needed a point. But maybe . . ." He had been about to say that maybe not having a point was the point, but the words had suddenly felt incredibly banal to him. "But maybe it doesn't."

Nancy nodded, as if he had actually said something intelligent. "A lot of people never get it. But most people need to visit a few times before they really understand how to be here."

"It's more human here," Felix said. He was surprised to hear himself say those words, but he felt he really did believe it. "But to be honest, I really don't know if I still know how to fill forty-odd empty minutes. I just don't know that there's enough to do for me . . ."

"You're absolutely right," Nancy said with a maddening smile. "There's nothing to do here."

Felix laughed. "At least you admit it."

He looked around. Two pigeons were chasing each other between the soaring rafters of the main terminal. Outside, through a high window, Felix could see a sprawling cumulus cloud pass in front of the sun, a shadow suddenly falling over the outside world as it did. A breeze blew through the cavern of the station and goose-bumps prickled on Felix's neck and arms.

"I do remember this now," he murmured. "A lot of it, I didn't even realize I'd forgotten. There's so much the other simulations leave out. So much . . ."

Felix let his words trail off. He had been about to say "of humanity," but he had already said that. And yet it still felt true. The other simulations kept you busy, and so

you didn't notice how unreal they were: how they abbreviated and elided the experience of living in order to get to the point.

"If you had taken a running jump off the platform that first day you were here, you would have sprained your ankle and skinned your knees. If you drink the tea too fast, you'll burn your tongue. Being human is just as much about what you can't do or shouldn't do, as it is about what you can do."

"Burnt tongues and sprained ankles." Felix laughed. "You think those are selling points? You have to work on your marketing."

Nancy shook her head. "We're not selling anything. This is just a place we're all passing through."

"It's a nice idea," said Felix. "But I can't really afford it. If I came here every day, I'd have to skip most of the other simulations."

"It takes a lot of hardware to do things the way we do," said Nancy. "Small as this place is, it's magnitudes more expensive to run than most other programs."

"Could you give me a job here?" asked Felix. "I can make coffee and tea as good as your simulated baristas. Let me take a shift. At least it would be something to do, and you'd save a little processing power. You could charge me a little less, or maybe I could be allowed to stay longer. Like working my way on a ship passage."

Nancy shook her head. "That's not how we do things. It's not about having things to do."

"You have things to do."

"As an admin? Believe me, I'd really rather not."

"Then let me do that. I think I'd enjoy it."

Nancy laughed. "That's *really* not how we do things."

Felix shrugged. "I can't afford it then. I can't afford to come here just to watch birds and burn my tongue on mediocre tea. Not for less than an hour a day, not if there's no point to it. I'd be stuck in the void for half the rest of the day, waiting there just so I could come here to wait some more."

"If that's how you want to look at it."

"Is that what you do? I can't picture you in the other simulations, pretending to be a secret agent or a half-orc sorcerer."

"You know we don't talk about those things here."

"Another rule? It takes a lot of rules to keep this illusion running."

"It's not an illusion," said Nancy. "It's an agreement. We're here because we believe if we participate in the agreement, we can make something real together." She checked the clock. "Look, there's a train coming soon."

"It's not time to leave yet. We've got over half an hour left."

Nancy nodded. "True. But if you're serious about spending more time here, I can show you something."

Felix suddenly wasn't sure that he was serious about it. If he was being honest, he doubted he would have lasted long as a barista, even if Nancy had been willing to let him try. Loafing around all day in the train station didn't seem much more attractive, but neither did any of the other simulations anymore. So maybe he was serious enough, at least until he found something else.

"Yes," he said. "I'm serious."

"All right then. I can show you something new that we're working on that will allow you to extend your time in the simulation."

"How long?"

"As long as you like, for the same cost."

"Why not? What do I have to do?"

"You're going to laugh," said Nancy, her eyes flashing and her earrings swinging. "But we have to get on the departing train."

Felix did laugh. "You're just trying to get me to leave."

"I'll be coming with you," said Nancy, as the train roared into the station. "Do you trust me?"

Felix nodded. He was willing to try, anyway.

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As the train pulled out, Nancy turned to look at Felix. They had taken two empty seats next to each other. "This is still a bit rough. It's not fully finished yet. But there's enough of it that you'll get the idea."

"So what is it?" asked Felix. The station slid away outside the window as the train picked up speed. He wondered if they were creating an actual destination for the train: a home, an office, a hotel room. Something to give the experience some variety and some sense of movement. "Where are we headed?"

"We're not heading anywhere," said Nancy. "But we are working on a way to stay here, on the train."

Felix's heart dropped. He tried not to show too much disappointment. "Just here? All day?"

"In a way," said Nancy. "But not exactly here. After sixteen minutes, this train would usually change over from an outbound route to an inbound route, and all outbound passengers would be automatically disconnected."

"But what?"

"I can transfer us to a different train that's always traveling, always outbound. We can stay there as long as we like, and tomorrow we can come back to the station."

"It wasn't quite what I had in mind . . ."

"Would you like to try it?"

"It's a different train at least, I suppose."

"All right, I'll do it. But you have to close your eyes first."

"Are you kidding me?"

"You have to close your eyes and keep them closed. That's the only way it works."

Felix crossed his arms over his chest. This was starting to sound like something you'd tell a fussy child to get them to stop complaining. But he watched as Nancy closed her eyes, dark lashes folding onto her cheeks. He had decided to play along, after all. Splotches of red and green floated in the inky blankness of non-sight as he closed his own eyes, ephemeral starbursts erupting.

"Okay," said Felix unenthusiastically.

"Are your eyes closed?"

"Yes."

The train rattled along, shaking and squealing.

"Keep them closed," said Nancy. "You can't open them."

"You'll put me to sleep," said Felix, laughing despite himself.

He hadn't slept in decades, not for a single second. But somehow, here, it seemed obvious that he might, that the motion of the train together with the darkness of his closed eyes might really send him to sleep. And maybe he would even like that. Would he also dream, he wondered? And would that be enough? Would the chance to dream again justify the cost and boredom and strangeness of the place? If only he could sleep, and if only he could dream, would he finally understand the appeal?

"I often sleep here," said Nancy quietly. "We're thinking of calling it the Night Train."

"We're on the other train already?" asked Felix. "I didn't feel anything."

"Yes, we are," murmured Nancy. She touched his arm lightly with her hand.

"And I can't look?"

"No," answered Nancy. "You'd better not."

Felix wanted to say that it felt no different. There hadn't even been a bump or skip in the simulation when they had transferred from one train to the other. But why

should there be? They hadn't really gone anywhere. Nothing had changed except the value of some bits in a computer. Felix knew he could never escape the sense of that, no matter how hard he tried. Closing his eyes didn't magically make it any easier to pretend that any of this was real.

Nancy's hand seemed to drift down from his arm. Her fingers slid away, or appeared to slide away. Felix wanted to ask her if she were sleeping already or if she were still awake, but instead he decided to be quiet. There was no chance of him sleeping, at least. His mind was too full of thoughts.

Felix turned his face toward Nancy, trying to sense her presence. He did not want to move or touch her, but he tried to listen to her breathing. To listen to her *being*. He tried to convince himself that he was really on a train, really sitting next to another human being, really experiencing any of this. But he couldn't. He just couldn't believe it.

And then Felix opened his eyes.

He opened his eyes, and he looked at Nancy. He wasn't shocked by what he saw, but he was disappointed and disgusted at the inevitability of it. For Nancy was indeed sitting next to him, but she was now a grotesque parody of a human being. The motion and sound of the train still felt entirely real, but Nancy and everything else in the interior of the train car had been converted into the crudest low-resolution wireframes.

Every surface of the car was a window now: utterly permeable, giving only the suggestion of enclosure rather than the illusion of it. Beyond the train, in every direction, was a blank whiteness. There was no sky, no trees, no station. Not even any tracks, except short stretches where they touched the wheels, all visible through the now-transparent floor of the train car. Otherwise, there was only a featureless expanse, through which the horrible wireframe of the train twisted and curved around invisible bends on a nonexistent railbed, like a tortured snake being skewered endlessly by a stick.

"It's good, isn't it?" asked Nancy. Her voice was a quiet murmur, but her wireframe lips flapped garishly over the bright placards of her teeth and the pulsating worm of her avatar's tongue. "Different, peaceful, human . . . wasn't that the word you used before?"

Nancy turned her face toward Felix, her eyelids clearly still closed but not able to hide her eyes through their unfinished transparency. The watery white orbs bugged out toward Felix, pixelated pupils rolling to match the false motion of the deceiving train.

"Do you think you'll come back again?" asked Nancy.

As she spoke, Felix raised his hands to his face, then stopped when he saw the crude lines of his own limbs. His head was buzzing, and his stomach clenched, and he suddenly wished that he could not feel all these bodily sensations so keenly when he clearly had no body to feel them. What was their purpose? Why should he be taunted by a body that didn't exist anymore? Felix wanted to run, but he couldn't see anywhere to run to.

"Do you think you want to stay?" asked Nancy again.

Felix opened his mouth and tried to think how he could possibly answer. After a few seconds, he closed it again without saying a word. Instead, he simply sat in silence, his eyes wide open, seeing everything and believing in none of it, and waiting for the nightmare to end.