

After so many years of hard work, so many sleepless nights spent watching every detail, rooting out every flaw, the moment of truth had arrived. Now only a couple of fine movements separated John from the future that loomed over him, same as his piled up childhood fears. Just a couple of movements, and the past is gone forever. It was time for the most important choice, the one he was inevitably approaching with every step he took. The moment has come.

He could already feel the past passing away. In an instant, all the possible options of the following events flew through his mind, but the choice was still hanging over his head like a boulder.

A moment of clarity, and his finger touches the switch. The switch flickers smoothly. John's heart freezes in his chest. Every second feels like an eternity, and the waiting an unbearable agony. Then, somewhere in the depths, beneath the lenses and shutters, a faint light appears. A green spark flashes for a moment disappearing right after.

The luckless inventor takes his hand off the switch and steps away from his motionless creation. He remembers his friends mocking him, his first love leaving him, calling him crazy. He remembers how his father shook his head, how his mother cried when she came home from a parent meeting. Had they really been right? Had all that time been wasted?

Something rustled behind him. The sound was like the fluttering of a thousand butterflies bursting in suddenly through the window. John turned around. 'It' was staring at the creator with a strange, scalding green gaze. It was odd, working for years on his creation without giving it a name. And now, Its bright gaze with a hint of curiosity pierced right through the thin inventor's stubbly face.

It was as if John's tongue was cut off. He stood frozen in place, staring at the miracle. A miracle he'd dreamed of since he was a little boy. His friends, his girlfriend, his parents... All of that flew out of his head in a flash, forgotten, as if never existed. Now he, John Edward Ambrose, was looking into the eyes he had dreamed of for so many years. Every tiny glimmer on the lens was exactly as it should be. This was it. Perfection.

Finally, John came to his senses a little. He shifted his weight forward and slowly lifted his foot, taking a step toward It. It twitched fearfully and drew back, losing its balance and collapsing to the floor. John rushed to the fallen creation and bent over it. The iris shutters of the "eyes" were shut, but they opened as soon as John leaned over It. More confidence appeared in the inventor's actions. After all, he was now acting as a mentor. He took Its hand and pulled It upward. It staggered to its feet and looked up at its creator.

'Well, hello,' John said softly.

'Well, hello,' Its voice sounded exactly the same.

'Let me adjust something.' John walked around behind It and opened the control panel.

'Let me adjust...' The sound got a little higher and deeper, '...something.'

'That's better!'

'That's better!'

'Oh yeah, we need to change the default settings,' John thought as he continued to poke around in the panel.

'Okay... Turn on voice perception... Training mode... I think it's done. How are you feeling?'

'Feelings are baseline.'

'Is that all you will say?'

'That is all I have said,' the sound flowing out of a barely visible speaker was surprisingly pleasant, 'But not all I can say. Please clarify the request.'

'What are you feeling at this moment?'

'I seem to be slightly confused and dazed,' the robot examined John's face as if studying it.

'Good... That's the way it should be. Do you know your name?'

'No. I don't have a name.' It continued studying its creator with curiosity.

'What made you think that?' - the inventor watched It, twitching at every move.

'I have no knowledge of it,' the creature looked away for a second.

'Then what name would you like to choose?'

'I am cannot process this kind of task yet.'

'Okay... Then... Sean! That was my grandfather's name. He was always there for me.'

'That's good. Are you offering me his name?' the robot froze in anticipation, looking John in the eye.

'Yeah... You could say that.'

'So, your grandfather doesn't need that name anymore?'

'I guess you're right. I'm John, by the way. That's my name.'

'That's funny. It sounds like my name.'

'It does. You can move freely now, can't you?'

'I think so.'

'Take this cup, Sean.'

John held the cup out to him, but it crashed to the floor instead of staying in Sean's hands.

'Oh,' Sean jerked at the sharp sound.

'Hold it tighter, but not by much. Try not to break it,' another cup was held out to the robot.

'Have you ever been outside this room?' inquired Sean while fulfilling the task.

'Yes. I go outside sometimes. Out of the house, too. The streets have been deserted since the war. A long time ago, my parents forbade me to go near the Edge, and then they disappeared. Along with everyone else. One morning they were just gone. I was alone until today. You can't imagine how much I missed human speech.' John switched his eyes from Sean's wood and steel body to the floor and back.

'I guess I can,' Sean tilted his head to the side, 'The Edge? What's that?'

John stumbled for a second thinking, then looked up into Sean's shining green eyes. 'Come on.'

John put on his jacket, slipped on his glasses, and they left the apartment. The corridors were empty, the walls worn and cracked. They walked down a flight of stairs and out of the house. The asphalt beneath their feet was dry, dusty, and in some places covered with sand. Around them was a small provincial town, mostly resembling a ruin.

They walked down the streets, looking at the buildings on their sides. A cool wind blew into their faces, leaving sand around their lenses. It wasn't clear how long they had been walking, but lo and behold, the Edge came into view. A tall wall, looking brand new, surrounding the city on all sides.

The wind began to pick up as they approached the Edge. It felt like it was trying to push its guests away, to turn them back.

'Here it is,' John stopped, 'I've never gone farther.'

'It looks majestic. Majestic and mysterious.' Sean suddenly continued walking. 'But we'll never know what's beyond the Edge, if we don't at least try to get close to it.'

'No. No, no, no, and no again! Sean!'

Sean was slowly moving away from his creator.

'Sean, stop!' John began to catch up with him.

Sean ran.

'Sean, the Edge will kill us!'

'What is the point, John? What's the point if we never find out what's there behind it?' The robot looked back, slowing down a little, 'Why did you create me, John?'

'You didn't want to just lock me in a cage with you, did you?'

'Sean, stop! We'll figure something out, I'm telling you!' John picked up the pace.

John realized his creation was all that was left. There was nothing else in this place that would make him stay. Suppressing desire to look back, he continued going after his companion.

The wind blew fiercely. Only a hundred meters separated them from the Edge. The robot walked ahead, resisting the wind. John dragged along about twenty steps behind him.

The wall rose above them with each step, growing more and more threatening. Finally, it was right in front of them. The wind howled so hard it made their ears ache. The sand crashed into John's skin, tearing it off in small pieces and leaving deep scratches. The latter was happening to Sean's covering, too.

'Is this what you wanted? Death?' John shouted, standing right next to the robot.

'No. Look at you. You are all ripped up. Why do you think you are not in pain, John?'

John looked at his bruised bleeding hands in surprise.

'Can you hear the wind roaring? Could it not be real at all?' The roar suddenly stopped. John froze.

'Or it is real to you alone?'

The roar filled John's head again.

'Look at yourself! Is this you?'

John looked at his hand. Where there should have been a bone, there was a metal skeleton.

'Am I me?'

The inventor looked at the spot where Sean was standing and saw himself there.

'What is reality? Is anything here real at all? Is it real, John? Or is it not?' Finishing those words, Sean walked even closer to the wall and disappeared.

John rushed after him. As soon as he touched the wall, reality dissolved.

The man lying on the bunk opened his eyes. A snow-white room surrounded him. No, this was not a hospital, and he knew it. But he couldn't remember where he was.

'Gerald! Phew, finally! I thought you were stuck in there for the rest of your life.'

'What?' Gerald recognized the appearance of the man who approached him, but he couldn't figure out who he was.

'I'm Mike. You don't remember? Oh, yeah.'

Two more people came into the room. A man and a woman. 'Oh, my God, Gerald! I was so worried!' The woman ran right up to him.

'Anna,' thought Gerald. 'Definitely her, but... Right.'

'Have you come to your senses yet, hero?' said the man who entered the room with Anna.

'I think so... Arnold? What happened?'

'Can you remember what year it is?'

'I think it's two-- Two-- Two thousand fifty-six.'

'That's great, Ger. What's your full name?'

'Gerald John Michaels. Wow, I'm starting to remember. The research! Right! So, what happened to me?'

'There was a fatal error on the server during another exploration. We managed to get Anna and Mike out, but you were stuck in there. At first, we hoped that you could get out on your own, but then it became clear that the error had corrupted your working cloud memory. There was also a chance, that after the error the server had severed your personal memory from it. It was dangerous to fix the server while you were inside, so we decided to send Mike to get you out. We instilled in him the importance of the word "Edge" so that it would become ingrained in his brain. From there, everything went according to plan: he came in without realizing himself, but soon, when his structure on the server was defined, the links to his personal memory began to appear. What happened next is pretty self-explanatory. You mentioned the Edge, he was drawn to it, and the closer you got to it, the exit from the server, the more connections were renewed. And now, finally, you're here. Congratulations.'

'Hell, I could have stayed there. How lucky I am. Mike, thank you.'

'You helped us out on the way out too, so we're even.' Stated Mike while touching Gerald's shoulder.

'Whatever you say,' Gerald smiled.

'Now get some rest. You've been through enough this week, as we've been trying to get you out. By the way, do you remember how long you were there from your own point of view?'

Gerald's eyes emptied as he tried to recall his experience inside the server.

'Stop pissing off our hero! Let him rest, Mike,' Anna took Gerald's hand, 'Sleep, martyr. Sleep.'

'Thank you.'

Two men and a woman left the white room dimming the lights down. Gerald took a deep breath.

So there it is, my reality.

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