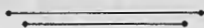


ETSAK KERET: FLY ALREADY. STORIES.
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WINDOWS



The man in the brown suit told him that it's okay if he doesn't remember anything, that the doctors said he just needs to be patient. The man in the suit added that the doctors said it to both of them, and if he doesn't remember that either, it's totally okay, that's how it is after an accident like his. He tried to smile and asked the man in the suit if the doctors told him what his name is. The man in the suit shook his head and said that when they found him on the side of the road, he didn't have any papers on him, but for the time being, his name can be Mickey. "Okay," he said, "I don't have a problem with that. For now, we'll call me Mickey."

The man in the suit pointed to the bare walls of the one-room, windowless apartment. "It's not the most beautiful place in town," he said apologetically, "but it's a great place to recover in. Every time you remember something," he said, pointing to the laptop on the desk, "write it on that so you don't

forget it. Memory is like an ocean," the man in the suit added in a pompous tone, "you'll see, things will slowly begin to rise to the surface."

"Thank you," Mickey said, and reached out for a parting handshake. "I really appreciate it. By the way, you didn't tell me your name. Or maybe you did and I forgot." They both gave a short laugh at exactly the same moment, and right after that, the man in the suit shook his hand warmly. "My name's not important, we'll never see each other again anyway. But if you have any problems or you need something, you can just pick up the phone next to your bed and dial zero. Someone will always answer, like in a hotel. Our support center works twenty-four hours."

Then the man in the suit glanced at his watch and said he should go because he had three more patients waiting for housing, and Mickey, who suddenly didn't want the man to go and leave him alone, said, "It's really depressing that there aren't any windows here," and the man in the suit slapped his forehead and said, "Wow, how could I forget."

"That's my line," Mickey said, and the man in the suit gave another one of his short laughs as he went over to the laptop and tapped a few keys. The instant he finished, large, brightly lit windows appeared on two of the walls, and a half-open door appeared on the third. Through it, he could see a spacious, elegantly appointed kitchen with a small table set for two. "You're not the first to complain about the rooms," the man in the suit admitted, "and in response, the company I work for has created

this innovative application, which affords a sense of open space. From this window”—he pointed to the window that had appeared above the desk—“you can see a yard and an ancient oak tree, and from the other one, you can see the road. It’s very quiet, hardly any cars on it. And the door gives a sense of the continuity of a home. It’s only an illusion, of course, but the windows and the door are synchronized, and you’ll always see the same weather and angle of light in all of them. It’s quite brilliant, when you think about it.”

“It looks amazing,” Mickey admitted. “Completely real. What did you say the name of your company is?”

“I didn’t,” the man in the suit said with a wink, “and it really doesn’t matter. Remember, if anything’s wrong or even if you’re just in a bad mood, you can simply pick up the receiver and dial zero.”

When Mickey wakes up in the middle of the night, he’ll try to remember exactly when the man in the suit left the room, but without success. The doctors, according to the man in the suit, said that the memory loss resulting from the blow he received might continue, but as long as it wasn’t accompanied by nausea or impaired vision, he needn’t worry. Mickey will look out the window and see a full moon illuminating the ancient oak tree. He’ll be able to swear that the hooting of an owl came from among its branches. From the window that overlooks the road, he’ll see the lights of a truck moving into the distance. He’ll close his eyes and try to go back to sleep. One of the things the man in the suit said was that he should sleep a great deal

because memories very often return through dreams. When he falls asleep again, he really will dream, but there won’t be any solution in his dream, only himself and the man in the suit climbing the ancient oak tree. In the dream, they’ll look like children and something will make them laugh, and the man in the brown suit, who’ll be wearing denim overalls in the dream, will laugh constantly, a wild kind of laugh, unrestrained, the kind that Mickey has never heard or at least doesn’t remember that he’s heard. “Look,” Mickey will say as he hangs from a branch with one hand and scratches his head with the other, “I’m a monkey, I’m totally a monkey.”

Almost a month goes by, at least it felt like a month, and nothing has changed. He couldn’t remember anything from the past and continued to forget things that happened only a few minutes earlier. No doctors came to check on him, but he remembered the man in the brown suit saying that there was no need for an on-site doctor’s visit because he was being monitored constantly, and that if anything was wrong, the system would react to it immediately. A white van occasionally pulled up next to the oak tree visible from the window, and inside it were a gray-haired, suntanned man and a fat young girl who looked at least twenty years younger than her companion. They groped each other in the van, and once they even got out of it, sat under the tree and drank beer. Nothing changed in the kitchen during all that time. There was a large window there, too, and it let in

a great deal of light, but Mickey couldn't see anything through it from his room because of the angle.

He would sit in front of the laptop, stare at the walls for a while, and wait for a memory or a thought to come out of nowhere, like a bird landing on a tree, like the suntanned guy and the fat girl, like . . . At first, Mickey thought he was imagining it: a kind of furtive movement, a shadow without a body that darted across the frame of the half-open door and vanished. Mickey found himself hiding under the bed like a child hiding from night monsters. Now he couldn't see anything, but he heard the sound of a cabinet closing and someone or something flicking a switch. A few moments later, something was visible in the frame of the half-closed door again, moving slowly this time. It was a woman, about thirty. She was wearing a short black skirt and a white button-down blouse, and she was holding a coffee mug with a picture of a sun and the words RISE AND SHINE! encircling it in colorful letters. Mickey didn't come out from under the bed. He remembered what the man in the brown suit had said, and realized that even if he stood up and started waving, the woman in the kitchen apparently wouldn't see him, because the woman didn't actually exist, because it was just a projection on a wall designed to keep him from feeling trapped in his small, windowless room.

The woman in the kitchen was texting on her cell phone now, and as she tapped out the message, her feet tapped nervously on the white marble floor. She had beautiful legs. Mickey tried to remember a girl with legs more beautiful than hers, but

except for the girl in the kitchen and the fat girl in the white van, he couldn't remember any girls. The woman in the kitchen finished texting, took a final sip of her coffee, and moved out of Mickey's field of vision. He waited another minute and heard something that might have been the sound of a front door slamming, but he wasn't sure. He hurried over to the desk, picked up the phone, and crouched behind the bed. He dialed zero. A tired male voice answered, "Support Center. How can I help you?"

"In the kitchen . . ." Mickey whispered, "I mean, the projection of the kitchen on the wall . . ."

"In the application?"

"Yes," he continued to whisper, "in the application, there's someone there. Someone lives there." He heard the tired guy type something on the other end of the line. "There's supposed to be a woman there, Natasha, tall, curly black hair . . ."

"Yes, yes," Mickey said, "that's her. It's just that there was no one there before, so it was a surprise . . ."

"Our bad," the tired guy apologized, "we should have informed you in advance. We're always updating and improving the application, and lately we've had more than a few complaints from users that the projected rooms are always empty, which makes them feel lonely. So now we're trying to add a touch of human presence. The Support Center should have informed you of the change. I have no idea why they didn't. I'll add a note to your file and someone will catch hell, I promise you."

"Never mind," Mickey said, "really. No one needs to catch

hell. Everything's fine. Who knows, maybe they did inform me and I forgot. After all, I'm here because of memory problems."

"Your call," the tired guy said. "In any case, I apologize on behalf of the Support Center. It's supposed to be an upgrade, not something that frightens the users. And I must tell you that for now, the service is free, but the company reserves the right to demand additional payment for human presence in the future."

"Payment?" Mickey asked.

"No one is saying that we will," the tired guy said in a defensive tone, "but we reserve the right. You know, it involves additional outlays and . . ."

"Of course," Mickey interrupted him, "it's perfectly understandable. Photographing empty rooms costs next to nothing, but a live person . . ."

"You're pretty sharp," the tired guy said, waking up. "It's a complicated business, especially an application like ours where every system is matched up with a different human figure. At any rate, if it bothers you, don't hesitate to call us at any time. She can disappear just as suddenly as she appeared."

From the minute Natasha appeared, time began moving faster for Mickey. Or slower, actually, depending on the time of day. In the morning, he'd wake up a little before she did and wait to see her drink her coffee, and sometimes she'd even eat some toast or

cereal, and text or talk to someone, apparently her sister, on the cell phone. Then she'd go to work, and time would start to drag. Mickey tried to remember things, sometimes he did a few drawings or, more precisely, scribbled in pencil on the lined pages of the notebook he found in one of the drawers. Sometimes he'd read something in one of the travel magazines he found in the bedside cabinet. Once there was even an accident on the road projected on one of the walls. A motorcycle driver skidded and had to be taken away in an ambulance. The suntanned man and the fat girl arrived every now and then, groped each other in the van under the tree, and drove away. But most of the time, Mickey found himself sitting and waiting for Natasha to come back. In the evening, she'd come home and eat a little meal, always simple things—it looked like she didn't really like to cook. She often ate dinner after her shower, barefoot and wearing only a T-shirt and underpants. Mickey would look at her and try to remember. Maybe he once knew someone like her, not Natasha, a different woman, with straighter hair or less beautiful legs, a woman he'd loved or who'd loved him, a woman who'd kissed him on the lips, who'd gotten down on her knees and put his prick in her mouth like it was the most natural thing in the world . . .

The phone woke him up. He answered, half asleep. It was the Support Center, a bored female voice this time. "Is everything okay?" the voice asked.

"Yes," Mickey replied, "everything's great. It's just that you woke me up."

"I apologize," the voice said, "you're being monitored, and your pulse rate suddenly started to increase, so . . ."

"I was dreaming," Mickey said.

"A bad dream?" the voice asked, sounding momentarily less indifferent. "A nightmare?"

"No," Mickey mumbled, "just the opposite."

"May I ask what the dream was about?" the voice asked.

"Sorry," Mickey said, "it's too personal," and hung up.

The next morning, he thought that maybe he'd made a mistake. That maybe he shouldn't have hung up. They might even be so concerned about him there, at the Support Center, that they'd cancel Natasha. Maybe they'd even cut him off from the application altogether. He didn't know if he should dial zero now and apologize, tell them again that everything was fine, that he was sorry he'd hung up, that he just wasn't expecting a call so late at night, that, actually, he wasn't expecting any call . . .

The half-closed door that led to Natasha's kitchen creaked open. Natasha was standing in the doorway, wearing a terry cloth robe, her hair soaking wet. She walked into Mickey's room with her coffee mug in her hand. "I thought I heard you," she said, and gave Mickey a wet kiss on the neck. "Here, I made you coffee." Mickey nodded, didn't know what to say. He drank the coffee. Without milk. One and a half teaspoons of sugar. Just the way he liked it. Natasha put a hand under his blanket and touched the tip of his erection. Mickey's hand shook and the boiling coffee spilled onto his hand and the blanket. Natasha

ran into the kitchen and came back with a bag of frozen peas. "Sorry," she said, and put the bag on the back of his hand.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Mickey said, "it's actually kind of nice."

"The burn?" Natasha asked with a smile. "Because if so, I can tie you to the bed when I come back from work, put on my leather outfit and . . . Just kidding." She gave him another wet kiss, this time on the mouth, checked the burned hand, glanced at her cell phone, and said that she had to run. "I finish at six," she said, "will you be here?" Mickey nodded. As soon as he heard the front door slam, he jumped out of bed and tried to walk through the door to the kitchen. There was nothing there, just a wall with a picture of a door projected on it, a door that now, unlike the previous weeks, was wide open. The painful burn on his hand and the mug with the yellow sun and RISE AND SHINE! printed on it were still there, clear proof that everything he thought had happened here a few minutes earlier had really happened.

He dialed zero. The voice that answered him was familiar. It was the tired guy, even though he actually sounded lively now. "Mickey," the tired guy said as if talking to an old friend, "is everything okay? It says here that last night, your pulse was rapid."

"Everything's great," Mickey said, "it's just that Natasha, you know, from the kitchen in the application, this morning she just . . . I know this sounds a little weird, but she just came into my room, physically came into my room, spoke to me . . ."

"I don't believe it," the tired guy said with real anger. "Don't tell me that they didn't inform you this time, either. No one called you last night to update you on the trial run of our new feature?"

"Some girl did call," Mickey said, "but I was sleeping. She might have tried to tell me and I was just out of it."

"I hear you," the tired guy said, "you think it's important not to complain. I respect that. Even though you should know that many times, complaints are not just bellyaching, they help us fine-tune the system. But it's entirely your right. At any rate, they were supposed to let you know yesterday about the new upgrade that enables the 'neighbor' in the application to actually interact with the user, mainly verbally and sometimes physically."

"Physically?" Mickey asked.

"Yes," the tired guy went on, "and that too, for the time being, is completely free of charge. It came from the users. Many of them said that the presence of the 'neighbors' aroused an intense need in them for human interaction. But you must remember that it's merely an expansion of the existing service and that if you feel uncomfortable with it, canceling is not a problem. The 'neighbor' will go back to living in his or her room and everything . . ."

"No, no. That's not necessary, really," Mickey said, "at least for the time being."

"Great," the tired guy said, "I'm glad you're satisfied. We've

only just started to run with this these last few days, and so far the feedback we're getting is fantastic. By the way, if you'd like, there's a way to block the sex with the help of an access code. You know, if you feel it's inappropriate or that things are moving too fast or you just . . ."

"Thanks," Mickey said in a voice that tried to sound unemotional, "for the time being, I have no problem with it, but if I do, it's good to know there's an option."

At night, he dreamed about Natasha and when he woke up, she'd be lying beside him in bed. She slept with her mouth open, like a little girl. Mickey didn't know what she was dreaming about. Or if she dreamed. Her whole entrance into his room, into his life, was completely unsettling, but in the most positive sense of the word. He still couldn't remember anything from before, but that bothered him a lot less. In the morning, when Natasha went to work, he would make pencil drawings of the ancient oak tree, and also of the sea, although he couldn't see it from anywhere in his room, but mostly he tried to draw Natasha. He got better at it with time, and when he succeeded in drawing something that looked especially good to him, he would show it to Natasha, who somehow always managed to compliment him and look indifferent all at once. It was a good time. Questions such as what she was, who she was, why she could move around in the projected spaces while he always

remained alone in the room, never came up. It was just a lot of warmth. And hugs. And jokes. Just the feeling that he was not alone in the world flooding his entire body.

One night, he woke up and saw that Natasha was lying completely awake beside him, looking intently through the window. Under the oak tree and the almost-full moon, the fat girl was lying on a checked blanket. She was stark naked, and the older man with the gray hair was on top of her. The man was moving his hips quickly, up and down, up and down, his eyes were closed, his thin lips clenched, and spread across his face was the expression of someone who'd just eaten something unpleasant. The fat girl's entire body vibrated. At first she moaned, but the moans quickly turned into sobs. "You think they're enjoying it?" Natasha asked, almost in a whisper. "It doesn't look like they're enjoying it." Mickey shrugged. "You know them?" Natasha asked, still whispering, and Mickey replied that you might say he did, because this wasn't the first time they were groping each other right in front of his window. "It's not a window," Natasha said, laughing, and hugged him tight, "it's a wall."

Later the arguments began, each one about something else. Natasha said he wasn't ambitious, that she was the only one who worked, that they never went out. She'd start out shouting and end up crying, while he mostly shut up. At some point, she started coming home later, and then it became routine. Mickey dialed zero to the Support Center and spoke to a woman with a runny nose. She told him that they'd been receiving many

mixed reactions to the latest upgrade. Some users got along with the "neighbors," and some just didn't. Mickey wanted to ask if there were cases where the "neighbors" didn't get along with the users. That, at least, was what he felt with Natasha. But instead, he asked if it was possible, at this stage of his rehabilitation, to let him go out of his room, and when the runny nose asked him why he wanted to know and if there was a problem in his room, he said no, but he thought that if he could go out a little, it would really help his relationship with the neighbor. Runny nose said she'd pass on his request, but her tone was very unconvincing. That night, Natasha didn't come home at all. She didn't show up until the next night and got into his bed wearing the clothes she'd worn to work, and they hugged each other. Her shirt smelled of sweat and cigarettes. "You and I don't get along," she told him. "I think we need a break." After that, they fucked as if nothing had happened, and she kissed him and licked him all over, and that was nice, but it also felt like a good-bye.

When he woke up, she was gone. The wall with the projected window that overlooked the huge oak tree was just a wall again. The second window had also disappeared, and so had the door to Natasha's kitchen. Four walls, no door.

The man in the brown suit thanked Natasha for the mug of coffee. "I apologize for all my annoying questions," he said. "I know we're not talking about an ordinary user experience here,

that this is something much more emotional and intimate, but with the help of your feedback, we can improve the service for millions of other users.”

“No problem whatsoever,” Natasha said with a sour smile, “you can ask me anything.”

The man in the suit asked Natasha almost everything: how much did it bother her that the “neighbor” was restricted to only one room; what did she think about the name “Mickey,” and in retrospect, would she have preferred to choose a name for him herself; to what extent did the fact that the “neighbor” didn’t know that he wasn’t real contribute to her excitement; and was his lack of memory and independent relationships crucial in her decision to end the service. When he asked her if what had developed between her and Mickey could be called “genuine intimacy,” Natasha found herself tearing up. “He was just like a real person,” she said, “not only in how his body felt. His mind was real. And now that I’ve broken it off, I just don’t know what you did to him. I hope you didn’t kill him or something. If I knew that I was responsible for something like that, I’d never be able to live with myself.”

The man in the suit put his sweaty hand on her arm in an attempt to calm her, then went to the sink and got her a glass of water from the faucet. She drank it down in one long gulp, then tried to breathe deeply. “You have nothing to worry about.” He smiled at her. “You can’t kill something that was never alive. The most you can do is turn it off, and in the case of the ‘neighbors,’ I can assure you that we don’t even do that. But let’s

forget the whole ‘neighbors’ business for a moment,” he said, stealing a glance at his watch, “and return to the basic features of the application, the wall projections of windows that look outside and the door that leads to the additional room—did you have reservations about them as well?”

When you’re in a dark place, you’re supposed to adjust to the darkness after a while, but in Mickey’s case, it was almost the opposite. With every passing moment, the room seemed to be getting darker. He felt his way around, bumping into furniture, running his hands along every inch of the bare walls until he was back at the beginning: four walls, no door. His right hand sailed around the wooden surface of the desk until it found the phone. He pressed the receiver to his ear and dialed zero. The only thing he could hear on the other end was a long, endless beep.