

Paradise Unwinding

My face floats giant in the clearing, an unreal square of California superimposed on jungle. I watch it from below, feeling dwarfed.

The me in the frame, physical-me, is talking. "Any promising stuff from the Wills then?" Its voice booms in the humid air.

"Hard to tell before the festival." I shift legs, trying to escape the feeling I am somehow selling out my friends. "They get real secretive. I think Willbee is rewriting his second place piece from the last festival, and it was decent, so maybe it'll be worth selling."

"Good. Mike's getting hungry for something new. Movie-length would be nice."

Mike is his--our--agent. The Wills are virtual clones of William Shakespeare. Every time one of them writes something worthwhile, I upload it to physical-me, who then does a little tweaking and passes it off as his own. As far as I can tell, he's making a shit pot of money, but that was the deal: one of me stays out there, hopefully getting rich but having to deal with the real world. The other one, uploaded-mind-scanned me, gets to live in simulated paradise, and all I've got to do is make sure he gets manuscripts.

Seemed like a fair trade-off at the time. I'm starting to have my doubts. "Cool. Well, I'll see what I can do."

"Do that, Dalton." Physical-me's gotten kind of smug since he started making money. The window blanks out.

On the walk down to the beach, I try breathing a little. Gloria is all about breathing deep after she found a book we uploaded by some Vietnamese monk, and she's trying to get me into it. I get that there's probably something there, but somehow I'm skeptical about getting enlightened as a digital scan living inside a computer simulated world--even if it *is* pirated military technology accurate to the atom. If anything, I keep expecting to look in the mirror one day and see green lines of code running down my face.

Outside the village I spot my daughter Laurie, tagging along behind Willick in the sweet potato patch. With no strangers and so few people, we let the kids wander wherever. I call out to her, and she comes running. Buddhist peace aside, I feel all kinds of enlightened when I hold my own daughter in my arms, even if I know she's just ones and zeroes too.

"Daddeeee!" she screams like a four-year-old fire truck, and I grab her mid-run to toss her in the air. She floats up, screaming, but it's pure joy. The trust in her eyes is enough to melt me, and for a moment it's physical-me and his problems that seem unreal.

Gloria's in the cookhouse, working with some of the other women on food for the festival. She steps out wiping sweat from her forehead, and I can't help smiling. She is five ten, a little taller than me, chocolate-skinned and beautiful, with an orange wrap tied around her frizzy hair. "How's lunch, honey?" She smells like frying bass when I kiss her.

She gives a short laugh. "If you were helping with the cooking, you'd know. We need some lemongrass for the soup. Can you get it from the west garden?"

Gloria and I have a history. While most of the women on the island were recreated from the DNA in hairs of women I found around Santa Monica, Gloria's comes from my ex-girlfriend Lydia. Like everyone but me, there were no mindscans to upload into her body, so she was raised from infancy by an earlier iteration of me. We did the same thing for the Wills--though their DNA I had to steal from a Shakespeare display at LACMA. And while they've all probably turned out much different than the physical selves they're based on, the Wills write good stuff, and I can't help seeing something of Lydia in Gloria. "Sure, love. You still reading at the festival tonight?"

She's picked up Laurie now, resting her on one hip. "Mhm. Did you finish your speech?"

As the de facto mayor of our little island, I am expected to give a speech as part of the opening ceremonies to our solstice and equinox festivals. This wouldn't be so demanding if I wasn't addressing a room full of William Shakespeare clones, but there it is. They usually take my poor composition in stride, and I do my best to say something appropriate and get the hell out of the way. The onstage readings of 10-15 novels and plays takes a week or more anyway, so no need to stretch it out. Still, everybody loves festival time, and I guess I do too. It's a break from farming and fishing to lay around, eat, and listen to each other's genius. At the end we all vote on our favorites and the winners are announced, ceremonial top dogs for the next season. Physical-me uploads some prizes for them too, anything from cans of Mountain Dew to marijuana cigarettes. It usually looks like whatever he's got laying around his house.

I used to ask for a cut of these, but having things from home materialize like I was there started to feel too...lonely. Now I just send him the winning manuscripts and try to enjoy fake paradise.

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"I had a look, Dalton." I am standing in the clearing again, festival over. "Not much here, is there? What are you, telling them to write poorly?" Physical-me's kind of pissy today.

"They write what they write, man. I thought Willbee's rewrite was decent."

"I guess. It's just... I've got a reputation now, man. I can't be putting out mediocre shit."

"Then I guess you're just gonna have to wait." I know when he speeds the sim up it only takes about thirty minutes to pass three months of our time. "No big deal, right?"

Floating window-me looks like it kind of is. "Yeah, or maybe the Wills are past their prime. Maybe we should rewind."

"What?" He is reaching off screen for something, and fear hits me. "Wait, what do you mean, rewind--" But the words are mud in my mouth, half-formed. Time stops.

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I turn to Gloria, sweat beading my brow from the humidity and exertion. "I should probably go, love." We've been hiking for about half an hour.

She nods, and Peter waves wildly, chub fingers wide. "Dada go!"

Gloria always gets quiet when I go to the office, because it's the only secret I keep from her. The whole island knows about my meetings with physical-me in the clearing, and Gloria probably knows more than she should about the island and what we're using the festivals for. But I can't show her the office--it's the one place I have that's mine.

"Dada GO!" Peter yells, apparently lecturing the trees now. He's two and does a lot of lecturing for his age.

"I'll be back tonight, okay love?"

"Alright." She gives me a quick peck on the lips and I turn up a side trail, leaving them to go hunt mushrooms. I am actually miles from the office entrance, but I take a different way each time, so no one gets an idea and comes looking for it.

Today it is the long way up the volcano. The sun is hot, and the festival's three winning manuscripts are lead weights in my hands. Near the top, the volcano has vents that let off sulfur

and heat, with some very territorial bees to boot. Several stings in, I find the vent that doesn't smell and, cringing a little as always, slide into it.

I come out in a sterile white room: tile floor, smooth walls, faint smell of orange. Though it could be an office space anywhere in the real world, I am still a little amazed every time I step in here, at how different it is from the island. It's comforting.

I am not actually on the island anymore. I'm not anywhere, really--just a computer-generated model of an office, stored somewhere on physical-me's hard drive. But it feels like home in a way the island never can. Before I met Gloria, I think I spent half my time here, playing video games, reading books, getting away from the island. Family life has changed all that--since Peter was born, I basically come once a season, to upload manuscripts.

I get to work scanning in the winners, letting the computer convert script to type. When they are done I will send them to physical-me, which is more like saving them to a different location than sending them somewhere. Meanwhile I play one of the games on here, kind of a dumb side-scroller about an alien with an eating problem. It gets old, as usual, while I'm still feeding the scanner pages.

As I close the game, a file catches my eye, tucked back in the program logs. It's named README DHALSIM. What? Dhalsim is a nickname I made up for myself, but never told anyone, a play on Dalton, simulation, and an old video game character. Why would I have saved a file here?

I am about to open it when physical-me's head appears, the window so big it cuts through the walls, my/his face filling the room. I freeze. "Those the manuscripts?" he asks.

"Yup," I say, feeling as though I've been caught at something. "Just about to send them."

"Kay." The window disappears.

I turn back to the file, wanting to open it. But this is the one day in three months when physical-me is around, and somehow I know he shouldn't see this. So instead I wait for the files to finish, shut down the computer, and hurry down the path toward the clearing. I feel a jar on the way, like the air is solid brick for a moment. It's a seam in time: physical-me has stopped the program, probably to read the manuscripts, and now started it again. I hate that he can do this. Hate the reminder that he controls my world.

Physical-me is waiting in the clearing, twelve feet tall, when I get there. "I don't know, Dal. This all seems pretty weak. I mean, the language is nice, but nothing happens."

"Yeah, I guess." I am waiting for him to mention the file.

"Seems like they haven't put anything good out in a while, don't you think?"

Suddenly I'm dreading what comes next. "What do you mean? I mean, maybe they're just in a slump. Maybe if you print it somebody will appreciate it--maybe it's just not your style!" But I can see the words are having no effect. "Hey," I say, but his hand is moving off-screen and the air's thickening, the breeze going still--

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I am a thousand years old.

This is all I can think as I sit in front of the computer in my little office space in the middle of nowhere, README DHALSIM open on the screen. I am a thousand years old.

I didn't understand what the file was at first, what it meant. It seemed like a diary, like pages and pages of someone's diary. No, not just someone--me, if my life had been different. If Veronica and I had had twins. It ends abruptly, then it starts up again with another life, the author writing more about the Wills, about Gloria this time instead of Veronica, about producing a best seller for physical-me.

Then a space, and there's more. Gloria and I have kids. Then I live alone. Then the Wills are dead. I'm a grandpa. I'm seventeen, just uploaded, and chasing girls. I'm suicidal. I'm double-married. And through it all, the same thread of confusion, the writers wondering where this file came from, whose stories these are--the same confusion I had on first read. And then the understanding, that they are all me. That I have been living life after life here, for hundreds of years.

That physical-me's been rewinding time.

It makes sense: since people here are identical to the real world down to the atomic level, since we are not robots reacting to stimuli, every rewind of the island would produce different results as time progressed. Meaning different actions, different people, different compositions for physical-me to publish. Whenever he gets tired of what the Wills are writing, he just rewinds the island and sees if something better comes up. And erases us all.

I want to feel anger, sadness, despair, but it's all been felt, all been written about here, many times. So instead I read, page after page, life after life, all the mes that have been, their joys and pains and struggles to go on after realizing what physical-me is doing. The blank space

at the end of each section where each life cut off, far short of full, kids not yet grown or often not yet born. These are not the lives I wanted. There are at least a hundred here, and who knows how many more that were never written down, all nipped in the bud.

I read to the last line, hungry and tired and unable to stop. I have no idea how much time has passed, where Veronica and Allen are, what I am doing. There is something unreal about this room, a fluorescent-lit box of code on physical-me's hard drive. That's all the island is too, really. A stream of data Dalton can rewind as he sees fit.

This was never part of the plan. I was supposed to grow old here, living in paradise, guiding the Wills as they gradually wrote wiser and deeper things, til we all died and our children took over. Once. Instead I am starting life over and over, rarely--it appears--getting much beyond marriage and a kid or two before physical-me rewinds time.

There was no functionality to do this in the original software--at least, none that I/we found before the mindscan. Physical-me must have found it or coded it in himself. Then rewind me every time he thought the Wills weren't doing well enough. And now I am a thousand years old, a thousand years I don't remember, some of them recorded here in my sloppy typing, each time coming to terms with what this means. Clearly, I/we never told physical-me about the file, or it would have been erased long since.

I admire the cleverness of whichever me originally made it. Anything I make on the island would get erased. But my computer in the office is just a partition of physical-me's computer, so none of the files would change with a rewind.

We have hidden our history inside the very computer that erases it.

For weeks, I don't know what to do with this information. I wander the island, catch some fish, play with Allen and make love to Veronica, but my heart's not in it. Living here has always been a little unreal, like when the movie ends and the credits roll, but I could forget that before, get sucked in. Now that I'm not sure the movie will even last to the credits, it's hard to suspend disbelief.

Veronica's noticed, and asked. Since I can't really tell her what's going on, she's gotten a little distant. I am trying to be a good husband, be a good dad, but I can't stop thinking this is all unreal. That it would be different, somehow, if we were in the physical world, in Santa Monica or wherever. That our love would be real.

There are ways to do it, of course. We've had avatars for awhile now, mechanical bodies for victims of severe crashes, cases where it's best to completely abandon the body. The mindscans they upload into them from physical bodies are the same as the mindscan uploaded into my digital body here, as the scans we could take of Veronica and Allen. So we could live in the real world, albeit with mechanical bodies. It might be strange, but at least then we'd be safe, couldn't have our lives erased whenever physical-me wanted. I would *be* physical me again.

I have to try. So when the winners are chosen, I upload them from the office, then walk down to the clearing and start a fire.

I feel the seam in time. Physical-me appears, looking happy. "Man, that one about the Nazis is pretty great."

"Yeah," I say, standing next to the fire, "Illian's really taken to some of those war histories we uploaded awhile back."

"Cool, well I'm going to see what Mike thinks of it, see if we've got a winner here." He shifts, noticing the sheaf of papers in my hand. "Whatta you got there?"

I've been waiting for it. "This? Oh, this is the actual winner. Kind of blows that Nazi story out of the water."

"What? Why didn't you upload it?"

"Because I'm done with this, Dalton. I want off. I've been living in fakeland for too long, man. Buy avatars for me and the family and upload us. I want to be real again."

"Or you'll what, burn it?"

"Yes."

He looks at me, then shakes his head. "You're fucking nutty, Dalton. I can just find that manuscript in the code."

I throw it on the fire. "Now you can't." I look at him, can't help saying it. "Right?"

His eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you've been rewinding me, Dalton. It's bullshit. This wasn't part of the deal."

I can't help feeling pleased at the surprise on his face. "How do you know that?"

"I--" I can't tell him about the file. "I figured it out. It's not that hard."

"Then you probably figured out what I'm going to do next." He reaches for the mouse.

"Fine. Do it!" I am shouting. "I'd rather get erased than live in this fake world!" But as the words are leaving my mouth, Veronica and Allen come unbidden to my mind, laughing with me around the fire. And somehow, much as I thought I didn't care, I realize now I do. Time stops.

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This is usually my favorite time of day, sitting on the beach after supper, but I find no peace in it tonight. The fire has burned low, and I lean over the coals, Gloria beside me on our stools. I would think Emma was asleep, but I hear him tinkling chords from the house, playing the finger piano Willbee made him. Gloria knows I haven't settled, and she lays a hand on my arm as I stare into the fire. "Dalton love, what's wrong?"

"I--" I sigh. I wanted to save her from knowing, but I need to let it out. "Glory, you know how the other me is creating our world on his computer?"

"Yeah," she says, an uplift to her voice as though it's almost a question.

"Well he's been playing with time too. He's been rewinding it." I gesture at our fire, the beach, the night sky. "He could erase all of this, right now, erase Emma, turn us into strangers. He's been doing it over and over."

She's silent for a moment. "Why?"

"Because every time he replays it, we do different things, which means the Wills write different works, so he gets new material. And our lives, our *children*, they keep getting erased." I look at her. "We've lived here hundreds of years, Glory. And don't remember any of it."

She meets my gaze, brown eyes dark in the firelight, but there's none of the anger I expect. "How do you know all this?"

"I found a record in the office, the journals of other versions of me, of our lives. They all figured this out eventually."

She's still looking. "And you're sure it's real?"

"I--of course it's real! He's been rewinding our lives honey!"

Gloria says nothing, looks at the ocean. The moon is a sliver on the horizon, dark enough that I can see the full disk against its white rim. "And you are worried that he will rewind us again."

"Yes. I'm sure he will. And we'll lose everything, again." I take her hand in mine. "We'll lose each other."

She looks back, head tilted. "But we have each other now. How does that change this?"

Her look is loving, and I feel my anger melting into sadness, like a sand castle at high tide. "Because I will lose you. It isn't right." And I'm surprised to find my eyes are watering.

"Dalton," she says, her hand warm on my cheek. Her head is shaking slowly. "But we could lose each other at any time, love. You know that. Even in the other world, the books speak of this, of death. That's what makes this so special, that we *can* lose it."

I open my mouth to answer, to say it isn't fair, but her lips are there first, her arms, and after a moment I let it go.

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It returns the next day, with a vengeance. Death is one thing; we have never had control of that. I know someday physical-me's computer will stop working, or he will die, and that will be the end of the island. But it isn't right that before then, whenever he feels like it, he can erase our lives. This isn't living out my life in simulated paradise. It's taking running starts at a life he'll never let me have.

So I have a plan. I am coding a virus, a worm that will eat holes through his hard drive once uploaded, disabling the program for good. There's no alternate copy, no cloud backup for the program, because physical-me can't risk someone discovering the island's stolen tech. And I would rather die once than keep half-living as his tool, and I think everyone else on the island would feel the same, if they understood.

By festival time, it's ready.

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I've been trying to act normal, but Gloria is quiet on our hike to upload the files, like she knows. Emma is up ahead somewhere, trying to hit parrots with his slingshot. I give her a quick kiss and take a side path, ready for this to be over.

Inside the office, I scan the manuscripts as usual, adding a few lines of code that point back to my partition on the drive. I don't feel used or angry anymore, just a quiet kind of victory. He can't stop this. By the time physical-me realizes what's happening, it will be done, with no way for him to bring us back. I wish I could share this with Gloria and Emma, but it's easier if they don't know.

I push send, and watch the screen for a long moment. Then slide out onto the volcano to watch my victory.

The island is collapsing.

From up here, I can see it all: trees, land formations, whole squares of ocean, flickering in and out of existence. The air is heavy, somehow, and I feel a sense of elation: it worked. We are beyond physical-me's control now, never to be rewound.

Beside me on the slope a tree disappears, reappears ten feet up, roots and all, floating there. I wonder how Emma is taking this, Gloria. I can just see her face, her knowing look. And like a dam breaking inside suddenly I want to be with them, to spend our last few moments together.

I run down the mountain toward where we parted, rocks sliding, disappearing, dropping all around me. I lose my balance and grab a tree for support, and its bark is smooth as glass under my hand, unreal. For a moment as I reach the larger path everything flickers around me, and I think I am about to disappear, but it all comes back, darker.

I don't know if they are right or left--I run right, ground buzzing under my feet. A few moments later I spot Emma's slingshot on the path, and find them around the next bend. Gloria looks confused, her brown eyes wide, and Emma is clinging to her leg.

She looks at me, and anger flashes in her eyes. "Dalton, what did you do?"

"I--I did it, Gloria. I pulled the plug. He'll never rewind us again."

The path goes flat beneath us. "And what, we are just going to die here? That's better?" I hear Emma crying now, heavy sobs.

I hold down a sudden sense of dread. "Yes! Yes, it's better! At least this way we can--"

The path behind them blocks out in my twelve-foot high face. "What the hell's going on, Dalton?" my face demands from the screen.

"It's--it's over, Dalton. You can't rewind us anymore. We're done."

"What do you mean? What the hell did you do?"

Something booms behind us, and I hear a roar of seawater, shouts. I have to shout now too. "There was a virus in the manuscripts, Dalton! I'm erasing everything!"

He looks shocked, but it is Gloria's brown eyes, in front of the screen, that hold mine. I can't look away from her, and something twists in my stomach. The world starts to fade--trees, physical-me's shouts, the heavy buzzing air--everything except she and I. I am not erasing everything, a steady voice in my head says. I am erasing Gloria. I am erasing us.

I reach out for her, and see in horror that her body is digitizing, becoming grainy somehow. That my own is doing the same.

And then I don't want it anymore. Don't want to destroy the island, don't want to stop the rewinds, don't want to have control. "Oh my God," I sob, my hand touching hers, the sensation grainy now too. My words are lost in the roar. "I--I'm sorry," I shout. "I never should have done this! I love you!" I feel helpless, like we are about to disappear, to lose everything--and then I realize what we have to do.

I grab my wife, my son, and point toward the volcano. We run.

The path is a gray track now, the trees mostly gone, and I glimpse a Will, maybe Willbee, running naked down the far side of the slope, screaming. Something slams into me and I black out for a moment, wake up with Gloria and Emma dragging me, scramble up, keep going. I lose Gloria's hand a moment later and turn to see her arm has totally disappeared, just a flat gray patch where it connected to her shoulder. There are things in the air and it's hard to breathe, like sucking in molasses, but we are almost to the top. I am afraid for a second the vent will be gone, but I find it.

"In here!" I yell, pointing to the vent. Behind Gloria, the sea is disappearing in segments, the horizon approaching. My left hand is gone. "Jump in!"

She looks at me, then jumps, Emma close behind. I slide in after, hoping to god the office is still there.

It is: quiet, bizarre, unchanged. Gloria and Emma are there, staring. Her arm is still gone. I want to explain but there's no time. I run to the computer, turn the monitor on, find the virus file, hit delete.

Nothing happens.

Cursing, I hit it again, again, feeling the island slip away. One wall of the office goes blank, a flat gray, and I see fear in Gloria's eyes. Her features are beginning to blur.

"No, goddamit!" I slam my hand down on the keyboard. "I want this!"

Another wall goes blank, and the couch disappears. The floor is next, going gray beneath us. Emma is clinging to my leg and Gloria is looking at me, horror in her eyes. It is over.

Then I feel a seam in time, and the walls are there, the floor. I stare, overwhelmed, sure I was about to lose them. Gloria wraps her arms, her two real arms, around me and Emma, and all I can say is "I'm sorry," again and again, against the soft shaking of her head.

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When we get the courage to slide out of the office, the island is there, surrounded by serene ocean, like we never left. I make up with physical-me, and he promises not to rewind without asking me first. I don't really believe him, but it doesn't matter. If taking control means erasing the people I love, then I don't want to be in control. I would rather enjoy the time we have together, however short that might be.

After a couple of weeks I delete the file. I offered to let Gloria read it, to learn something of her past lives, but she wasn't interested. I guess I'm not anymore, either--you can't live in the past. Gloria says this whole thing has made me a better dad. I know it's made me a happier one. It's hard to remember why I ever wasn't--after all, we are living in paradise.