

The landscape is variable and it snows like glitches. Chaining, collisions. Reruns. The virtual story is coming apart.

The young people are finding ways to relate. They're walking through the snow, the freezing night, the Antarctic cold to reach each other, to touch each other's face. There are no screens any more (sharp and shiny and smooth with color). There are only old text based terminals. Back and forth, prompting, everybody's named Eliza... or Alice... or Bob. Dear Turing, I need academic accommodations for this test. There are no more resources to build the sophisticated machinery. Scarcity is the stress lying on the tip of everybody's tongue. Nobody kisses each other. The programs rock us softly to sleep.

Matty watches the rising flood water. The sky sickens with bad grey black clouds, which loom in over the crashing ocean. Everything is angry and upsetting, the waves and the clouds and all of the emotions. They're turbulent. Matty feels similarly. Nausea roils in her stomach.

The people are suffering. And Matty has to do something. She's been specially chosen. She feels it is her destiny. She loves them, although she doesn't understand them. She's different. She hates herself for it. How does it make you feel?

Although the technology is too expensive to build, the analytical mindset remains. The culture guides people's behavior. They bundle in the skins of dead animals, make ginger tea like primitives, but they operate algorithmically. They are physical and immediate. They no longer

have a taste for amusement, nor for sweetness nor for fakery. They inhale harsh cigarettes like vacuum cleaners(1) and they don't even flinch when the smoke hits their throats. There is no more appreciation for art or distraction: they are hard. Their world is hard.

People are speaking of going underground. In the Northeast the second ice age is arriving and in California superfires rage terrifically across the mountain megaforests. Europe is buried ten feet deep in snow, and icicles crash with loud sounds from the statues. The air is becoming toxic, poisoned with chemicals. There is desperation and crying. The mothers wail and gnash their teeth.

Matty has smooth black eyes, big and round and void as wormholes in her stone-still face. She looks out over the ocean and feels simultaneously stirred and flattened out. She identifies as she/hers but is still figuring out how to tell other people that. She wants to take control of society, normalize it and make it fit her ideas of what should and shouldn't be. The sky starts glitching and changing color, becoming impossible graphics. I told you – I told you already: The virtual story is coming apart.

Children make her the saddest. They never deserved this. She imagines them submerged mercifully into a bathtub, overwhelmed with love and attention until at last the last bubble peters out. She hates herself for this, too. She's only 15 at this point in the story.

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Matty will grow up to take over the entire world, like she set her mind to do so early on. People will associate her promises with hope. People will celebrate her energy. She will wear smart pantsuits. She will set new hairstyle trends weekly. She will look healthy, and honest, and real.

This is when people still had the energy to move and to do things like celebrate her. She's very sad now at the way things turned out. Everybody splayed out across their couches, slack-jawed and stupid, needles and intravenous tubing infesting their arms, letting their low ceilings encroach and cave in on them, uncaring. Doing anything: whatever helped them to forget the sun.

They had to destroy all art with the sun, or nature, or the outdoors. It made people too sad. Now that all media was centralized and deployed from one place it was easy to remove material from the archives. It consistently made her sick to do this: she always pressed DEL personally: she felt every loss of culture's collective enterprise as a sharp pain. But it had to be gone forever. She needed to give people HOPE. Every digital byte destroyed, smashed into random noise. The sky is gGLITCHING again. I tttToLd ayo lureDAy : Th : The virtual sis tcoRYm ing aPARTt.!!!

They had to go: "We have to go underground," She asserted, she implored them. "We have to go underground."

“I want you all to live: I want you in comfort.” She blared from their TV screens, a radiant angry angel, dark and ferocious as a devil. What she wanted was that the whole world would go up in flames directly to hell. She wanted to take everyone with her to heaven. It was this ardent passion: It was this mad desire that people responded to and agreed with. From billboards with half the LEDs burnt out. “I want you to be HAPPY.” She had tears in her eyes. So did you.

The old system was about to collapse: The new system was becoming. It took her a long time to make peace with it, but the defining feature of her recent transition into adulthood was her final giant radical acquiescence/acceptance that she could not fight nature. That changing the world was too hard; but there was still one thing you could control:

The body.

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“You smell so good,” She whispered to her one and only lover. When a person’s central nervous system is changed – e.g. by an SSRI – they do change. The way they process the world is altered. They are different. He probably wouldn’t even have considered himself one of her lovers.

We had this feeling we could reprogram anything. That if we just understood it and could place it in its proper category we would be able to control it. We were so stupid and naïve. She still appears on TV regularly, well they’re not really TVs anymore, but I’m not sure if I can call them

tele-screens or not. Either way people receive the news somehow, while sitting in their living quarters, straight-up-doped-up and so addled, saliva traversing weirdly the idiosyncracies of their chins, and most of the time it's old – re-mixed, re-combined, re-imagined – but sometimes it feels truly new. Your mind can recognize when you've never encountered something before; novelty. When she reappears on the TV these days she looks older and less alive, more sour, less throbbing and ripe. Her dreams have rusted. Poor Matty. People call her she/hers these days. Every time she comes anew she says the same thing: every time people want to believe her. "Recent breakthroughs in geoengineering..." "... neuropharmacology research and development more efficient and effective than ever..." "... and soon we'll all escape this God-forsaken hole."

They lived all of them now in tunnels, hastily blasted out in a spate of sudden political energy, that flared up and then dissipated all at once instantaneously or maybe even so fast that it happened in reverse. But just as they realized that they had made a huge mistake, that they wanted to go back, the tunnels were sealed off and caved in intentionally in an idiotic rash of overconfidence. The EU had also voted to go underground, and just like that everybody disappeared into the Earth all at once and tragically. And people dreamed of but never acted on the idea of somehow recreating access to the Old World. But no one knew how. And they were scared of flooding the tunnels. Everything was interconnected.

There were rumors – those first few years, when people still talked at all – that one could get to Russia even. That it was connected via soil somehow. They could have tunneled to Alaska, and

through Canada. They could be among us now. Those kind of rumors petered out over time like the little fragile bubbles. People forgot their paranoia. People forgot even their hate.

Now the people atrophied, sank into uncomfortable synthetic fibers, felt their bodies sick and rotten like disease and mistake, and they felt themselves stop caring, defiant.

It had been 15 years. Matty was a sorry figure now because her hair had greyed and she always looked sad and drawn. Her previously perfectly curved lips were beset with deep lines, lines that spelled worry and self-doubt and regret. But she still appeared regularly on the screens, because she had to. She was the only person anyone knew, and the only person they loved.

She had promised the people a space ship. That was the problem. They wanted a miracle. “We are going to go to Mars,” she had rejoiced, as if sharing surprise birthday plans with a beloved child. As if Mars could be the zoo. “We are going to recreate the biosphere. We are going to see pure breathing green. We are going to feel real air in our lungs.”

Now everyone was dying, underground and alone in these prison cell-like abodes. Bachelors lived by themselves and saw no one, and family units were encouraged to stay together, to save space and conserve resources.

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“I want to watch you sleep,” she also told him once. He didn’t really like the sound of that.

“Honestly, that’s kinda weird.” He was a normal guy, jokey, and she found that charming.

Later she would realize that their love was only alive in the SSRIs, that it wasn’t something she ever would have felt otherwise. That’s why she eventually stopped taking them, silently, so as not to betray the political movement she had begun (as if it was just an accident.) But SSRIs had made her too charitable. She felt happy and relaxed on them, and being happy and relaxed dulled her edge. She needed to feel the constant grating discomfort, like the world was a bench that was too cold and hard for her, so she constantly had to get up and make adjustments. She was alive with this terrible energy, and it manifested in different ways throughout her life. But it was in her adolescence that it truly darkened, that it took on the unhappy and twisted shape which dragged the entire world ugly down under into it.

“WITHDRAW YOUR CHILDREN”

The people were screaming. Mad prophets in the street. Ravers, nutcases at night, grinding teeth and smacking walls. “WITHDRAW YOUR CHILDREN.”

Educational clinics had to be devised in their new makeshift universe. The parents, drugged up as heavily as they were, could not be trusted to raise children who would be a functional part of society: There would be a day – she said it again, she said it louder, she refused to back down from her claim, “There will be a *day*,” she repeated, “When we will return to the world, when

we will cohabit again with nature.” And when that happens, our children must be ready. They must be able to rejoin society and help us rebuild. They must be well educated.

The children were given drugs. They were being prepared for the heavy sedatives: their central nervous systems were still too raw and fragile. In school, the children were taught to sit still. Simply that: it was such a beautifully elegant curriculum. There was only one metric, and that was how well the children were sitting still. How many sat silently and how long they sat like that for. It was beautiful to see them spread out in that way, all sitting and doing nothing at all. The Observers were taught teaching methodologies and the correct words of encouragement to employ in different given situations. Input output specifications. There would be one Observer per every fifty or one hundred children, depending on the size of the villages. Not many villages were larger than one hundred families. Some had fewer than twenty.

The Curriculum had taken her weeks to compose. The making of it had possessed her; even her lover was drawn in to the momentum of it. He asked her questions, unmistakably curious. She didn't miss him. She hated him. She resented him.

*Withdraw your children.* It was scrawled across a wall. She was spited by it. She tried to smear it out with the palm of her hand. She was headed to a meeting with the Director of a local Cluster. She was consulted occasionally, because people recognized her genius. When they were confronted with new and difficult problems, they asked her what she would do. And she

would sit and think, for a length of time proportional to the difficulty of the problem, until she came to a solution. She always did.

This situation was tricky though.

“Here she is,” the Director admitted wearily. The Director used he/him pronouns. He pointed to a character in the grainy footage. Everything was recorded, of course. It was the future.

The little human he was pointing too was a cheeky girl of thirteen or fourteen years old. She was wriggling in her seat. Her hair was in uneven pigtails. She couldn’t stop laughing in class.

“You must sit still,” the Observer said to her in the video. The Observer was pale; she did not know what to do. Life had never been so intractable before.

“What is she doing?” asked Matty.

“She’s drawing mazes. She hands them to the other children – that one’s her friend. They engage with them. They become too active – the Doctor said the drugs would work, but –” the Director inhaled through his nose, visibly flustered. He clicked, zoomed, and enhanced. “And she won’t stop telling jokes.”

Matty took this in gravely.

“I will meet the child.”

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Sitting across from her at the desk was the small savage. She was blowing a raspberry.

“I’m going to tell you why you are here,” Matty said calmly. She was essentially the supreme ruler of the New World, but she made time for every one of her citizens. She pushed a small plate of grapes to the little girl.

“You are disrupting people’s lives,” she stated coldly. “I want my people to live in comfort. I do not wish for them to be disturbed.”

“Listen, lady,” said the animal, popping a grape between her fingers. Some of its flesh landed after a lovely parabolic launch on Matty’s shiny oak desk.

“I don’t have time for this. I’m learning to do handstands. I told Debra I’d learn how to do them by Friday.” It was Tuesday evening. The Doctor cleared his throat. The Warden looked at the clock.

“Sweet girl,” said Matty, and her face twisted into a strange grimace. The Psychologist looked concerned. “You have two options.

“Now listen, I love you, and I care about you. I want to see you do well. I think you have a special energy – I haven’t seen one like it before – and I think you could do great things for our society. I used to have a unique energy myself. The good God above ground knows we could use real talent.

“The people cannot be disturbed. They are hurting. They miss their home: What would you know about home? You’ve lived your entire life here. You have no idea what we all have lost.” Her voice trembled with bitterness. This was Matty’s inexorable power: she felt things so strongly. Even the girl stopped now, considered her. It’s a beautiful thing, a child’s consideration. They are taking everything in so magical and new.

“Although I say you have two options, you really only have one. It’s true that the Warden could take you to the cave, but I don’t wish for that to happen to you.” Matty opened her hand. It contained the sedative the Doctor had given her; strong enough for the most truculent specimen of large adult man. It had been synthesized that morning, rush order. Anything for the woman who saved the world. Matty took the girl’s tiny hand, pressed the contents of her palm into it. Children exist to take instructions. They are blank slates. The drug would be good for her.

“For you I have a medicine.”

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After that happened, Matty stopped seeing her lover. It was her choice, strangely enough. As much as she had needed his attention, she suddenly felt an emptiness in his perspective. She saw him as a caricature; unreal. She would never truly understand how this had happened. When exactly people had started seeing her as a woman. Why the girl died.

And although it was the most important event in the world, it was never told on the news. Instead, she woke up the next morning, drank black coffee and spread jojoba oil over her face, pulled her fingers through her hair, and went to record a new message to her people.

What did she see looking out at the ocean?

Was it a premonition? Did she know it would end this way? That she would realize with a shock that she had given up? That she had buried everyone she loved underneath her own misguided convictions? How could she admit that? How could anyone ever admit that to themselves?

The people needed to be kept comfortable. She believed it; she felt it deep down.

“Yesterday I have seen the space ship,” she said to the drone bearing the camera, staring straight ahead, voice trembling, her big strange undecipherable void-like eyes free of any sign of distress. That’s what they loved about her, all of them. That’s what they respected. That she gave them a sense of hope.



Yesterday she sat at the main frame in the Media Distribution Center, and she found the footage the Director had shown her. She found all footage from that school and from that village, for that matter. She collected it all, selected it in one giant flourish of the mouse. There was nothing to lose, the girl was gone, and who would see it on the world the virtual uh the virtual u She gGlitchedShe She SheShSh pr e s s d DELETE

**THEY ARE DRUGGING YOUR CHILDREN  
T HEY ARE SENDNG THEM TO HELL  
YR CHLDRN WILL D I E . WHAT FOR ?  
WITHDRAW YOUR CHILDREN.**

“Today I know our way out. Tomorrow we will be free.”

