

Dimensions

by Kerrie Herron

John's eyes cracked opened to his shadowed corner of the hospital room. His joints resisted as he rolled onto his side, wires and tubes pulled against the motion. He lifted his head. He wanted to see her, one last time, before they pulled the plug.

Lying there framed in sunshine next to the window, Mary, his wife of a hundred and thirty years, was still. Chords snaked out from her gray head like a modern day Medusa. She was in stasis. Afraid of the dark, John made sure they kept her by the window. With one foot in the shadows of this world and the other in the unknown, he knew Mary's subconscious would appreciate the warmth on her skin.

He rested back upon the pillow. He and Mary had a lot in common. But, they had their differences, too. Like any married couple they had their spats. Most, he conceded. Nothing he wasn't willing to admit his part in, anyway. There was one topic though that they never met eye-to-eye on. Religion. Her devout Catholic upbringing was at odds with his atheist, natural selection pragmatism. When Amy died, though, the divide nearly split them apart.

John sighed and closed his eyes. Five years ago he took a risk, and soon, they would find out if it had paid off. Tired. His mind drifted to memories, cherished ones. One in particular unfolded in his mind like an old photograph tucked away in his wallet. That moment propelled them to this day.

#

He wedged his loafers on, one foot at a time. Even the effort was exercise. But, his doctor ordered him to walk two miles everyday. He walked through the small apartment. Mary sat in the recliner unflinching as she stared at the wall screen. He paused. She was already connected to the device. It kept her occupied while he was gone. Technology. He studied the image rotating across the screen. She was in Florida. The waves crashed in slow motion on the bleached white sand. John's lips tugged down. It was the only vacation they could afford to take as a family. On a teacher's salary, it was an extravagance.

He leaned down and kissed her temple. Mary jerked at the contact, then lifted her hand, not moving her eyes from the screen. John took it and squeezed. It was no use telling her he'd be back soon. She would just forget.

He pushed his finger against the small metal panel, and the door slid open. He nodded to the other residents as he shuffled down the hall. John tapped his wrist monitor to make sure it was on. If he was going to walk two miles, he darn well better get credit for it. He smiled and waved at the young kid behind the desk, Kenny. He was probably half-his age. Eighty, John guessed. Kenny didn't even glance up as John pressed his thumb on the security panel. The glass doors slid open. And, John shuffled out into the world.

The outside seemed to hum. Not like an engine, John thought. But, it was more like an electrical hum—like an appliance left to run. He paused on the sidewalk. Mary would like this weather. The brilliant white light of the sun felt warm on his parchment thin skin, bringing to mind of younger days, playing outside with their daughter. He stood there lost in memory. A life once taken for granted was gone in a blink of an eye. A hover car smoothly flew by the facility turning into the lot, searching for a place to park and land. John shook his head and began his walk.

He had a loop that he regularly took. Down the sidewalk. Two blocks to the park. Then, one stroll around the perimeter and back to the facility. When Mary was in better health, they enjoyed the walks together. John carefully crossed the road. He was one of the few pedestrians just using his eyes to navigate. Everyone walked around or hovered, multitasking with glass screens in front of their faces. His brows rose as young kid floated, whizzing above him, nearly grazing his balding head.

It wasn't that long ago that John was the early adopter of all things new. He sighed as the park neared. His shoulders slumped. Mary, always the cautious one, warned him that these new-fangled things would be the death of humanity. He peered across the faux green park. Artificial turf coated the rolling terrain like a bright green blanket. It wasn't. Technology was the death of earth—and their daughter. His eyes watered. John tread along his path. The plastic leaves in the trees rustled in the manufactured breeze. John bent down picking one up that had fallen to the ground. He marveled at its realism. Veins laced the green paper-thin leaf. Its edges were uneven and imperfect. Flawed and almost real.

A child screamed just ahead, from joy or pain, he didn't know. John's heart hammered in his chest. It reminded him of Amy. He dropped the leaf and moved as fast as he could off the smooth terrain of concrete to the screaming child. The turf wasn't as easy to tread, but the child's screams sounded closer.

John's eyes landed on the playground. It had been over fifty years since he'd gone near one. Mary couldn't, and so he didn't either. A red plastic tunnel, high above the ground, connected two play sets together. The child was stuck inside screaming for help. John scanned the area looking for the kid's parents. Not a soul was in sight. He wiped the sweat from his brow and closed the distance. The kid's face screen was left abandoned at the bottom of the ladder. John picked it up. He marveled that the child had even done as much, dropping it to physically play in the real world. Most children only played connected to the meta-verse, adults included. In all his years walking around the park, it was a rarity to see a child playing there. Play sets were a relic of a past nearly forgotten.

John cleared his throat and yelled, "Hey kid, why are you screaming up there?"

The kid, between choked filled tears, responded. "I'm scared."

John rubbed the back of his leathered neck eyeing the labyrinth of climbing bars. It would take all his strength and then some to get up there.

"What are you afraid of?" He asked.

"I can't see the other side."

John's lips slid into a half-smile. "Well then, just go back out the way you came."

The child sniffled. "If I do that, I'll never know what's over there."

This made John laugh softly to himself. The kid must have taken the face screen off before entering the tunnel. Technology, in some ways, took the fear out of exploration. You could always just point and click returning to your starting point.

“Listen, kid, if you could see what I’m seeing, then you’d understand. There is more than one way to get in the tunnel. If you back out, I’ll show you.”

The kid was quiet for a moment. “I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

John’s forehead crinkled and looked around again for the parents. “Where are your parents?”

“My mom is at work.” The kid spoke softly.

“And...you came here by yourself?” John’s lips fell into a line. Amy was just like that. Adventurous.

“I just didn’t want to connect to school today.”

John scratched his cheek, the stubble reminding him that Mary would tell him that he needed to shave.

“Why didn’t you want to go to school today?”

A long pause, “Math.”

“I see.” John eyed the tunnel. “If you tell me what you are working on, I might be able to help. I used to be a science teacher—not math. But, there is a lot of math in science, so...there is a good chance I can help.”

The squeak of rubber soles against plastic echoed in the tunnel as the kid scooted back to the entrance. A brown head dipped out and turned to John.

John swallowed. Her eyes were the wrong color, but the kid looked a lot like Amy at that age—freckle faced and full of life.

“Wow, you are old.” The kid said as she climbed down the bars.

John laughed.

“Hey, that’s mine.” She jumped down and charged forward, yanking the face screen from John’s hands.

“Oh, yes, of course. I picked it up for you.”

She began to slip it onto her head.

“Wait.” John reached out, stopping her arm. “Look at the play set first. See the other one on that side. It connects to that tunnel.” He watched as her eyes darted to the other end. “See, if you kept going, you would have ended up on the other side.”

The face screen hung from her hand as she skeptically walked across the turf. John walked a few paces behind. He guessed from her size that she was probably only eight or nine—too young in his opinion to be out on her own. He sighed. Just like their Amy.

“If you want, you can climb up this side and go through the tunnel.” He reached out his hand. “I can hold your face screen for you.

The little girl looked back at John. “You promise not to leave me?”

John’s eyes misted. “I promise. I will be right here waiting for you.”

“Ok.” She smiled and quickly handed him the face screen. In less than a minute she was up to the top. She looked down at John. “Promise?”

“Promise.” He waved up to her.

The girl dipped her head into the tunnel and crawled. John's hands clutched onto the face screen. "You are doing great! Keep going!" His adam's apple bobbed.

Amy was like that, curious...and adventurous. Mary swore their child didn't have a scrap of her DNA. Amy was all John.

"I'm scared." The girl's small voice echoed down to John.

"I'm right here, kid. You are doing great. Don't stop. Keep going." John encouraged.

"But, what if I don't make it? What if I get stuck?"

"Then I will go up there and rescue you." Words he wish he could have told Amy. He swallowed. "I promise."

The girl's small voice called down to John. "Ok." Her rubber soles squeaked as she inched forward.

"Good job, kid. Keep going."

Moments later, the kid poked her head out the other end of the tunnel. "I did it!" Joy lit her face.

"Yes, you did kid. Good job." John smiled up.

The girl rapidly dismounted the play set, cheeks rosy. She reached out for her face glass.

"You are a good coach, ya know. All of my sport-bot coaches on here just yell." The girl lifted the face glass. "But, you talk. Is that because you were a teacher?"

John smiled. "That, and I was a dad, too."

"Oh, yeah." Her pink cheeks dipped crimson. "I should probably go home."

"Probably." John agreed. John glanced at his wrist monitor. He still needed to get his miles in. "What do you say if I walked with you?"

“How? You don’t have a face screen.”

“Oh, I just use this up here.” John tapped his finger to his graying temple.

The kid’s eyes rounded. “Wow.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty smart.” His lips twitched. “Science teacher, remember?”

The girl nodded and slipped the face screen on. “I have to use this.”

“You don’t know your address?”

Her brown head shook side to side under the screen.

“Well, then, I will follow you. Lead the way.” The girl took a step, then reached out her hand. John swallowed and slipped his into hers.

The girl stepped forward with confident steps tugging John forward. “So, how many kids do you have?”

John dipped his head under the branch as she led him across the park. “Just one.”

“Boy or girl?” She asked.

“A girl.” He gently squeezed her hand. “You remind me of her.”

They reached the sidewalk on the far side. The girl’s screened head bobbed up at John.

“What’s her name?”

“Her name was Amy.”

“Why do you keep saying was? Is she dead?”

His feet froze. The frankness of the child’s question stabbed at John’s heart, but he didn’t blame her. “Yes.”

The girl pulled him forward. “What happened?”

He never spoke about Amy—not to anyone, especially not with Mary. She blamed him, in part, for Amy’s death. And, to some degree, he did as well. After all, it was him that encourage her to go off world.

“Amy was a scientist.”

“Like you?”

“Yes, sort of. I taught science. Amy made it.”

The girl’s head bounced, as if she understood.

“Amy was chosen as the youngest scientist to crew the flight to Venus.”

“Oh, wow, that’s cool.” The girl looked both ways on her screen and pulled John across the road.

There was more traffic on this side of town. John wondered at the child’s ability to get so far on her own, but, then again, technology was a wonder.

“So what happened?”

“There was a crash—in space. Space debris undetected pierced the shuttle. If it had only been one puncture, they might have been able to overcome it. But, with all that technology, the debris went unobserved. The shuttle was pelted and destroyed.”

It was the girl’s turn to stop. She slipped off the face screen and looked up at John. “Your daughter was on the Atlantis? Wow. Everyone knows about the Atlantis. They’ve got a simulator game we connected to in Science. If you avoid all the obstacles, you complete your mission arriving at Venus. It’s really cool. Someday, when I grow up, I want to go somewhere like that. I will be a famous explorer.”

John's eyes watered, but he held back the tears. "Yeah. Well, you've got what it takes. Amy was really smart. Adventurous. And, curious. Like you."

The girl slipped the face screen back on. "Or, maybe I'll just be a scientist when I grow up."

"Maybe, so." John's lips twitched. "Who knows what technology will be like when you are ready to choose? Why you could be the first girl to visit a new solar system. Anything is possible, kid. Never stop dreaming."

They walked in silence for some time, each lost in their own thoughts, until the girl stopped in front of a shiny, new complex. Its nano-tech facade interacted with face screens making it appear whatever color a user preferred; but to John, it was a tall plastic box—nothing like the brick and mortar home he and Mary used to own.

"This is it. This is my hub. I live on the third level." She released his grip.

"Well, then, I guess this is goodbye." John waited for her to go inside.

"Oh, no." The girl stiffened.

"What's wrong?"

"My mom. I had my coms off. I missed a ton of messages. She's on her way." The girl slipped off the face screen. Panic etched her face. "I'm in big trouble."

"Want me to explain what happened?"

Her brown head nodded. Her eyes widened, looking beyond John. "She's almost here."

John turned to see a determined woman leaning forward on her hover shoes coming right at them. The girl reached up and took John's hand. The woman pulled off her face screen. Just

feet away, John could see the anger, pain and relief wash over her face as her eyes darted from him to her daughter.

“That’s your mom, right, kid?”

“Yep.” The girl whispered leaning into John’s leg.

“Jessica Owens. You get over here right now.” Tears leaked from her eyes. “Don’t you ever do that again.” She bent down and clutched the child in her arms.

John cleared his throat. “I found her on the playground. Stuck. I helped her get home.”

The woman protectively squeezed the girl to her side as she stood facing John straight on. Her eyes dragged over him like a detective looking for evidence of foul play. “Thank you.” She looked back down at her daughter. “She was supposed to be connected to her class.”

John scratched the back of his neck looking down at the girl. “Yeah, she told me that there might be an issue with math.”

“Math? What’s going on, Jessica?” She knelt down looking the girl in the eye.

“Dad used to always help me. Now, he’s gone, and you are always working...I don’t know how to do it.”

The woman stiffened. “Ok, well, we can get a tutor-bot. No big deal.”

“My husband...is no longer in the picture.” She stood straighter explaining. “Thank you for getting her home.” She reached out her hand to shake.

John’s brows rose. No one shook hands anymore. But, then again, he wasn’t wearing a face screen. He reached out and squeezed. “No problem.”

John turned to leave when the woman stopped him.

“Sir, you wouldn’t happen to know a Mary Johnson. I put an alert out for Jessica, earlier, and someone posted that an older woman in the same area had just gone missing from the senior hub.”

John’s heart stopped. He froze. “That’s my wife.”

#

They found Mary several blocks away from the facility. With no wrist monitor or face screen, they were unable to track her. But, John had an idea. He found his wife sitting on a bench gazing out at the manufactured lake. It was her favorite spot. He thanked the lady and the kid for going with him to find her. He explained that Mary’s dementia was getting worse. They said their goodbyes, and John took Mary back to the facility.

Focused on Mary and her cognitive decline, John nearly forgot about the encounter with the kid and the mom. It was almost a week later when he was notified that he and Mary had a visitor. The woman stood in the lobby with the kid in hand, face screens removed. She smiled and shrugged releasing the kid.

The kid ran forward. She hugged John, wrapping her small arms around his waist. “Will you be my math tutor?”

“Things aren’t going well with the tutor-bot.” The woman explained. “And, I’ve been thinking....”

That’s how Jessica became his weekly visitor at the facility and how John first learned of the experimental program, Dimensions. Jessica’s mom, Donna, was the director of the government backed social experiment. First began as social platform on the meta-verse, Donna saw the potential for the most fragile demographic...the old people, especially those with

dementia. While still in trials, the data was promising. Dimensions uploaded the person's consciousness and restored damaged cells. Essentially, a person could live for eternity in the meta-verse without a body. John's initial response was excitement and awe at the potential. But, Mary. He knew that she would be scared of such a thing. A woman of God and he a faithful devotee of science, it was a touchy subject. In her lucid moments, she spoke more and more of heaven and seeing Amy again. It was a difficult decision. But, once it was clear that her mind was gone, John placed his bet on science. They would never see Amy again, but they would have each other. He hoped.

#

The woosh of the door sliding open jarred John from his thoughts. The nurse stepped into the room.

"Your visitors are here." She smiled weakly, her head turning slightly to Mary's still form. "Are you ready, John?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." John waved his hand and the bed tilted, raising him to a more upright position.

"Ok, I'll send them right in." She hesitated at the door. "John..." She slipped her face screen off. "I hope I'm not being too forward, but...I think it's really noble what you are doing." Her eyes watered. "I would give anything to be with my parents again." Her eyes shifted to Mary. "I know your concerns. But, she will be happy to see you."

John cleared his throat. "Thank you. I hope you're right."

"I'll send the girls in."

"Thank you, Shelly."

“Of course. And, John, I’m not saying goodbye. I will see you and Mary again. Someday in Dimensions.”

John blinked back tears. “I plan on it.”

His fingers trembled as the doors slid shut. It was a gamble. No two ways about it. But, he made a promise to Mary all those years ago. He would be with her through thick and thin. Hard times and good. He wasn’t about to go back on his word now.

The door parted. Donna and Jessica entered. Dressed in her lab coat, while he knew she was there as a friend, Donna was also there to work. She initiated Mary’s upload last night at midnight. It would take longer for the system to correct Mary’s corrupted cells. Concerned, John insisted that Mary not spend one moment alone without him in the meta-verse. Donna assured him that once the system was ready, she would begin his ascension and the two would be reunited instantly—if things went according to plan.

“John!” Jessica hovered to his bedside. “Are you so excited? We will get to do math together anytime we want.”

His lips twitched. “That’s right.” Jessica was now thirteen and still just as brave and bold as the first day he met her.

Donna checked Mary’s monitors. “I’ve been tracking her progress. Everything is going well, John.” Donna was a great scientist and an even better mother, he noted over the years.

Jessica’s smile shifted. “Are you scared?”

He looked down at his trembling hands. The dark blue veins protruded against his thin skin like roots of a tree pressing against the earth. “Yes, I guess I am. Just a little bit.”

Jessica placed her hand over his. “Remember when I got stuck in the tunnel?”

His eyes misted at the memory. “You know, I was just thinking about that.”

“Well, you talked me through it. Mom has everything set up. I’ll be in the Dimensions meta-verse when you get there. I will teach you and Mary how to get through it.”

“Is that so?” John smiled.

Jessica nodded.

Donna moved to John’s bedside, her hand resting on his shoulder. “Everything is ready, John, when you are.”

John glanced back over at Mary. She would be scared. She didn’t like the dark. “Ok, let’s do it.”

Jessica squeezed his hand. “It is going to be so cool. I promise.”

Her enthusiasm was catching. *Just like Amy*, he thought.

Donna smiled. “Ok, it will be a few moments. The team will come in and get the process started. I am taking Jessica back with me to the labs, so she can get set up as well.” Her voice wavered.

John put his hand over hers. “See you on the other side, kids.”

“I love you, John.” Jessica leaned over the bed and awkwardly hugged John’s stiff old bones. His arms shifted around her.

A single tear slipped down his cheek, “I love you, kid.” His unshaven jaw catching in her brown hair.

Jessica laughed. “You won’t have to shave either in the meta-verse, John.”

“Good! I don’t have the patience for it.”

Donna’s brows furrowed. “Ok, Jess, let’s go, so the team can get started.”

Jessica gave John's hand one last squeeze. "I hope you like equations." She rolled her eyes. "We just started a new unit—algebra. It's the worst."

"I know a few tricks." John winked.

"Great. I need all the help I can get."

"I got you, kid."

"I know you do, John." She walked to the door with Donna. "See you soon."

"See you soon, kid." He waved not sure if he really would see them again.

#

Two hours later, John breathed his last breath on the Earth and entered an unknown dimension. He had tried to imagine on so many occasions what the moment would look like, feel like, and it wasn't anything like what was before him now. Waves crashed along a sandy shore, and the woman he said, "I do," to stood before him like a snapshot taken from his memories so long ago.

"Mary?" John whispered.

"John." She turned around. Her gray hair now brown again like in their younger years, her skin youthful and plump. She wore a dress like the one she wore on their Florida vacation.

John swallowed. "Are you mad at me?"

Her lips slipped into a smile. "It's heaven. How on Earth could anyone be mad?"

Tension left his shoulders as they fell into an embrace. It had been many years since she had recognized him or touched him with such familiarity that John choked back a sob as he clung to his wife.

Mary pulled back and cupped John's cheek. Her lips fell into a crooked grin. "You shaved."

His joy reached new heights to be teased by his wife once again. John wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. "Yes, I suppose I won't have to worry about that anymore."

Laughter carried on the wind. They both turned. Just beyond recognition, a girl ran in and out of the waves along the beach. Her brown head appeared almost golden in the sunshine—*like an angel*, John thought.

"Amy!" Mary released John and began running to the girl.

"Mary—wait!" John yelled at her backside.

It was no use. His wife was on a mission. John rubbed the back of his smooth neck. He closed his eyes. One of them would be right. Their age old debate would be settled once and for all. Jessica would be disappointed, he knew, if the procedure didn't work. But, despite himself, he hoped Mary was right. It could be Amy down on that shoreline, a younger version, of course, but it could be her. John opened his eyes to see the two embrace. His heart pounded in his chest. Meta-verse or not, seeing his wife hug the young girl, well, it looked like heaven to John. Following the footprints in the sand, John released his fears and jogged towards the pair with hope coursing through his veins.