

## Home Entertainment

None of us has ever been outside. In fact, I'm not sure I believe that anything exists outside the house. It doesn't really matter though. We're happy here. We have everything we need.

Currently, there are twelve of us, although I seem to recall that there were more of us when I was younger. Janet is the only one close to my age, and although she's not very pretty, we've hooked up a lot in recent months. It's a pleasant enough way to spend the time, I guess. It beats listening to Paul and Michael argue about how they want to rearrange the furniture in their bedroom for the hundredth time, or watching Eunice's trembling hand dribble porridge down her face.

The house is beautiful, or so I've been told. I don't really have anything to compare it to. It's a big, spacious affair, with rambling hallways and lots of nooks and crannies to hide away in. It is tastefully decorated with paintings and modern sculptures of imaginary creatures like elephants and falcons. I'm pretty sure all animals are a myth, although my mother used to assure me that dogs and cats were real. Most of the hallways and rooms include numerous floor-length mirrors. I like to pose in front of them. I like to look good—my dark hair carefully tousled into careless waves, teeth freshly bleached, and my skin bronzed in the tanning bed.

When I was younger I used to make a game out of how long I could stay hidden before anyone found me. Back then, Eunice's hair still had that salt-and-pepper look to it, and she was more cantankerous than she is now.

“You know kid, if you hide too good, they might not ever find you,” she croaked over her shoulder at me. She had an uncanny way of knowing exactly where I was hidden.

“So? That’s the point.”

“So what if you go and get yourself stuck somewhere? No one will ever find you, and you’ll starve away to nothing, and one day years after you’re dead, they’ll find your shriveled little corpse in a corner somewhere.”

That stopped the hiding game once and for all.

I think one of these days we will find Eunice shriveled up somewhere.

The Alzheimer’s hit her hard. Apparently it makes you forget things, and get people and places confused. She always knows where she is though. We’ve always been here, so there’s nowhere to get confused with. Sometimes she asks for her husband, or my father. Their bodies have been down in cold storage in the basement for years now.

I like to spend my days walking the house. It’s the only way to keep my figure. If I walk every single hallway, from one end of the house to the other, it’s a half mile. I try to walk it six or seven times a day. I can judge how well my workout is going by the sheen of sweat on my reflection. I always bring my handheld with me and record my workouts for the others in the house.

We have an interwork page on the wifi that we use to like and comment on things the others are doing. Sometimes I don’t talk to anyone out loud all day. My handheld is always with me, and it’s less effort than having an actual conversation. I think they get annoyed with my workout tips though—they warn me not to exert myself too much. That’s how Uncle Jimmy went—he had a heart attack during his cardio routine one day, there was nothing we could do.

I've been told that outside there used to be people called "doctors" who specialized in keeping other people healthy. I don't believe it. Everyone's health is clearly their own responsibility. That's why I pace the halls, and Fiona weighs six hundred pounds and hasn't left the living room in three years.

We've all sort of accepted that it's her space now, but we get annoyed when we have to sit on the floor in order to crowd around the tv in there. Half the time she doesn't even watch, she just has her face buried in her handheld, cackling at things on the interwork. We all sort of worry about how we're supposed to get her downstairs to storage when her body gives out. It's only a matter of time with her and Eunice.

Janet and I are the youngest ones in the house. Lately we've been getting hints from the older housemates that it's about time we made it official, moved into the same room, and had some kids of our own. I just don't see it working out though. Janet wants to leave, as if there is something worthwhile on the outside.

"Do you want to see the sky?" She asks me. She's stretched out on her fluffy, queen-sized bed, and I'm admiring myself in the full-length mirror. The lighting in here is very flattering.

"I can see the sky. It's on the holograph images on the windows, and sometimes it's on tv."

"That's not the same. You know what I mean."

"I don't think I do." Sometimes she really baffles me. I know what outside looks like. Isn't that enough? There's no cable out there, no wifi, no climate controlled bedroom with fiber-down pillows.

She sighs. “My mom would’ve understood.”

I choke down a laugh. “Jenny was crazy. She left you in the middle of the night and didn’t even say goodbye.” I glance over at Janet. “Oh, the eyes are everywhere, they’re watching us, all the time, *and we are never alone!*” my voice cracks as I imitate a girlish squeal, flailing my hands around.

“Don’t exaggerate. She ran off for reasons you will never understand. And she didn’t sound like that,” Janet pauses. “And she did say goodbye, I just didn’t realize it for what it was.”

“Sometimes I wish my mom had gone instead. When I see her in the halls she always wants to stop and talk about my life. It ruins my pacing.” I flex in front of Janet’s mirror. At first it’s goofy, but then I am once again taken with how great the lighting is in here.

Janet just shakes her head and stares off into the distance. Sometimes I think she could be pretty if she only took advantage of the makeup counter that was installed by the house AI when she turned sixteen. Every time I bring it up, she gets defensive and tells me she wants a “natural” look, and that she “likes” herself this way.

I don’t know who she’s trying to fool.

Her mousey brown hair is dull and often tangled, nothing like the sleek shine of the women on tv. She has too many freckles, and refuses to wear the contacts provided for her, instead opting to wear the glasses she broke last month with a piece of tape wrapped around the middle. She wears only sweatpants and hoodies, refusing to utilize her extensive wardrobe.

“Are you two coming to dinner?” In the doorway stands Stan, the least popular person in the house—which is impressive since Eunice can no longer hold coherent conversations, and Fiona only jeers at whatever screen has captured her attention.

“No, I think we’re going to stay here,” I say. Janet is giving me that look she does when she’s feeling lonely and weird, and I’m a little bored. I sit on the edge of the bed and play with Janet’s hair.

Stan hovers too long in the doorway. “You sure?” He wrings his hands together, and neither steps into the room nor walks away.

“Yes, Stan, we’re sure.” My fingers are already testing the zipper of Janet’s hoodie.

“I-b-but, I heard it was gonna be really good tonight. Th-the pantry restocked itself with real pineapple this time, and Paul said he found a great recipe for it,” he stammers and doesn’t make eye contact. This is why he’s so unpopular. He can’t take a hint, and there’s a whiney quality to his voice that’s hard to tolerate. We often sit together and downvote his pictures for the hell of it.

“Get out, Stan,” I snarl. “Or stay here and watch, I don’t care.”

Janet shoots me a look at the last remark, but says nothing. This is the only fun we ever have nowadays.

Stan lingers once again for a moment too long, and then I think he might call my bluff. I plant a vicious kiss on Janet’s lips, and when I look up he is gone.

“Would you mind getting me something to eat?” Janet’s voice seems to float up to me, where I am pleasantly dozing in her bed. The pillows are excellent, and I find her bed more comfortable than my own.

I grumble in protest.

“Please, we skipped dinner,” she’s not usually this needy, and it makes her less attractive.

Still, I am not unreasonable, and I agree. I peel back the covers, pull on my pants, and strut out into the kitchen. When I enter the kitchen, I find all the other housemates (minus Fiona, of course) huddled over the kitchen island. They all stop talking at once, and give me the guilty looks of people who have been caught gossiping.

The silence stretches out longer than even I am comfortable with. I want to break it, but if I do, then I have lost this tiny battle.

Finally, Stan clears his throat.

“So, uh, how’s Janet?” He keeps crossing and uncrossing his arms, as if one or the other will somehow give him more stature. I feel the others’ eyes boring into me. What the hell is this all about?

“She’s...fine,” I assert. How should I know?

“Oh, good. We’re glad to hear it,” Michael chimes in.

“Yes, we were just thinking of you two,” Paul adds.

“Cut the crap, boys.” It’s Alice, a woman who seems to have been middle-aged for my entire life. She could be in her late thirties or late fifties, it’s impossible to tell. Every year her birthday party is the same, as we celebrate her something-seventh birthday. She is also remarkably blunt.

She turns to me: “We need to talk.”

“About what?” It is not our habit to host household meetings like this. We barely tolerate each other as it is, and we generally do not bother ourselves with each other’s problems.

“We’re worried about Janet,” says Alice. “We think she means to go outside, and you know that’s just not how we do things here. We don’t want her to disrupt our routines.”

“What does it matter?” I scoff. “Let her stick her nose outside if it will get her to stop whining all the time. It’s really annoying.”

I weave through the kitchen, checking my reflection in all the mirrors on the wall—flashing my bright smile at all of them. I look good. I remember I’m supposed to be grabbing food, and push several people away from the fridge as I pull out some leftovers from dinner.

“Could you at least pretend to care?” my mother’s voice is unexpected and harsh. She has taken to living like a ghost, not saying much, and barely eating. I am irritated by her sudden opinion on my life.

“Hello to you too, mother. I *could* pretend to care, but the fact is, I just really, really don’t.” I swipe a stale bread roll off the counter and grab the food from the fridge. I’m about to make my way out of the kitchen when the silence is broken by a sound we have not heard in decades.

Someone has opened the front door.

We all move as one toward the foyer. The automated system that runs the climate control is ping-ponging at us angrily. It wants us to close the door so we don’t mess up the temperature settings. As I turn the corner, I am faintly aware that the food I was holding has hit the floor. In our house, it is easy to forget that the holographic images displayed on the window do not always correspond to what is outside.

The heavy front door is open, and Janet is standing just outside the threshold.

*She’s outside. How can she be outside?* I think to myself.

The sky is not the pristine blue of the windows, not the perfect color on the tv. It is grey and angry. We should not be looking at it so directly.

I am accosted by a gust of wind, more insistent and wild than anything that comes out of the air conditioner. It tangles my hair and sends shivers running down my spine.

I am not where I am supposed to be. We must close the door, with or without Janet.

At that thought, I realize Janet is standing stock still, looking at something immediately in front of her. It is a camera—not the big black cameras that stand on tripods we've seen on tv, but a sleek little white thing hovering at eyelevel.

I am at a loss for words, and so is Janet.

I move forward, to close the door, to grab her hand, I'm not sure. As I reach the front door, I realize the little camera is not the only one. There are dozens of mounted cameras outside every window of the house, and several others hovering and circling the house.

They are all pointed at Janet and I.

For the first time, I know what fear feels like. I grab Janet by the hand, and yank her back inside. She is too shocked to fight me, and even locks the door after I close it.

Inside, there is silence. That door has not been opened in over twenty years, since Jenny went mad and ran outside and never looked back. No one knew she was gone until the next morning when the door was found unlocked. No one went after her.

Finally, Janet says "I knew it."

"Knew what?" Alice is blunt, as usual, but there is an unexpected curiosity in her voice.

"The cameras. I've always known, since I was young. My mom told me we were always being watched."



“Your mother was mad! She left the total comfort and security of the house on an... *unfounded suspicion!*” Alice tries to keep the judgement out of her voice and does a bad job.

“It’s not unfounded now, is it?” Janet’s voice cuts through the room like a knife. “There are cameras everywhere outside, and I’m sure they can see through the holographs. Haven’t you ever wondered why there were so many mirrors in the house?” Her voice cracks at the end of her thought. She is breaking, sinking down onto the floor.

Suddenly, I realize what she means. The mirrors are one-way glass, like the kind I had seen in crime shows growing up. We are never alone.

I shudder when I think of all the things those eyes have caught me doing. Me and Janet. My endless posing and primping in front of the mirrors. My whole life has been on display for someone else.

“Who’s been watching us?” I address the house AI directly, something we almost never do.

The clunky computer voice doesn’t understand my question. “PLEASE REPEAT THE STATEMENT.” It is loud and formless, being channeled from the various speakers and audio ports installed throughout the house.

“I said, who’s been watching us! Why are we here?” I stare at the ceiling, as if the house has a face.

“YOU ARE UNDER OBSERVATION.” This is new. None of us is sure what to make of this information.

Janet is sobbing on the floor, and Paul and Michael cling to each other on the couch.

Fiona is probably watching one of her shows in the other room, blissfully unaware of the whole incident. Funny, how she can so easily lose herself in technology.

“What do you mean? What kind of observation?” Alice jumps in before I can think of anything to say.

“ENTERTAINMENT.”

We look around at one another, struggling for answers.

“Explain...please,” Janet’s voice sounds as lost as the rest of us feel.

“GO TO THE TV. ENTER CODE ‘ULTIMATE REALITY.’ OBSERVE.”

We try to press the AI for more answers, and receive none. It seems to have frozen until we follow its directions.

Hearts pounding, we gather in the living room, and wrest the remote away from Fiona.

“Hey, jackass, I was watching that!” She flails her grubby arms at Michael, who easily steps out of her reach. She continues to protest, and we shush her as one. For once, we are all on the same page.

With trembling fingers, Paul enters the code in the remote. The screen goes black for a moment, and then boots up a channel we have never seen before.

“This time on Ultimate Reality Tv!” a male voice announces the unfamiliar tv show.

“Do you want to see the sky?” Janet is on the screen. I am too. I don’t understand. I almost don’t recognize us on the screen. We are sitting in Janet’s bedroom. It’s last night.

The clip cuts to a close up of my face, contorted with disgust: “Stay and watch, Stan, I don’t care!”

Alex Baker  
Short Fiction

The announcer continues. “All this and more, on today’s episode of Ultimate Reality Tv!” We look at each other in horror, as the reality of the situation has dawned on us. We are the ultimate reality show. We have been on display for a distant audience our entire lives.

With a click, the screen goes black as I turn off the tv.