

## The Rope Swing

Written by Preston Tholan

Another day of smooth skin and white teeth began for 29-year-old Ezra Cole. Hazel-brown pigmentation with eyes golden, Ezra remained humble in her comfortable, pastel-colored flat. She decided to take a short but hot shower, as fluoride was both manated and heavily taxed in the year 2052. She thought it'd be smart to save up for her Upload, if she'll ever have one. Uploads were almost unaffordable compared to when the Virtual Exodus first began. That exodus occurred about four years prior to Ezra's hot shower and marked the revolutionary admiration for copying memories to physical Spares. In the shower, she thought about her boyfriend Wallace, who should have been dead. Or rather, *was* dead if not for the other Wallace, the one who worked construction; forcibly far away.

That was often a choice for the wealthy elite, to have their offloaded memories mimic their physical bodies. Not that Wallace was particularly wealthy or elite, but when Wallace was alive, he appreciated working for an architecture company that gave him good financial benefits. Benefits that would subsidize a 20-year Upload, and because he passed tragically, the late 31-year-old could put no more than those 20 years into his Spare. Despite overlooking any trauma an anatomically encased hard drive might cause, Wallace was always interested in quirky anthropologies; like a tattoo to signify marriage, cryogenics, and in this case, a chance at outliving himself. One night he would confide with Ezra (after miscalculating the strength of a late-night edible) the obscurity of life-after-death. The conversation culminated in Wallace rejecting the theory that a soul leaves your body and passes onto another phase of life, albeit death. It was now noteworthy with him gone.

Like Wallace, steam haunted Ezra's shower, fogging the reflection of her nakedness. The thoughts of her Upload hung as dew drops on the bathroom ceiling, clinging as stubbornness to when Wallace was alive, when things were normal.

Around the time he died, Ezra read a piece in the Times about aging memories. And how each time a person recounts an event, the memory becomes once removed, a bit altered. In a glass-half-full way, Ezra simply thought of memories she'd had like snowflakes. No two memories quite alike, a fragile reminder to cherish each one before melting away. But another analogy was more troubling. She imagined a Xerox machine, at least, the ones she was told about. An image of Wallace would print, and go right back into the scanner, becoming a less original each time. Her image of Wallace would become more faded each time she'd remember him, slowly distorting until his picture had lost details. First the contour of his body, then his eyes, his face, his smile. Ezra tried to limit the number of times she thought of him. But the shower was running long anyway.

And she couldn't help it.

"Come sit with me," she said, smiling. She sat on a rope swing, swaying lightly. Wallace put his coffee down, she thinks. Yes, it was morning. Must've been a Saturday.

"It'll break with both of us, but... If that's what you want?" he said, pretending to be bigger than he was, squatting down dramatically like he was going to spring to a jump and weigh it down.

She laughed, quickly regretting her idea. "Okay, don't. Don't! Wallace!"

Wallace straddled the rope, lightly on top of Ezra. "If the branch breaks, it'll push me to finally go to the gym."

She laughed, she remembered.

Ezra thought of transferring some memories from Wallace's Spare before signing any legal documentation, in what would have been a complicated medical procedure (more expensive than the option to Upload to a rusty metal box) with an unimpressive success-rate. So instead, it was easier to convince herself of being old-fashioned. With attitude for vintage kitchen-wear, and clothing from the 2030's, sometimes she thought about what the memories would be like from Wallace's Spare. But ultimately, she preferred the original, even with the Xerox analogy. It was a simple memory anyway -- the one of them struggling to share the same rope swing. She didn't know why she liked this memory so much. But it was her favorite.

Ezra considered Wallace a generous man. After all, he had left her with plenty of downloadable memories in his will. The young shell of Wallace that existed now, was transferred to work under the same architecture company miles away, and in a different state (Montana if you're curious). Wallace's former boss was courteous enough to relocate his Spare far away from Ezra, as "Having a sudden, younger boyfriend around the house might become uncanny", he put it. Besides, large corporations, like the one Wallace had worked for, usually owned the Spare under a strict contract given that Wallace's Upload was expensed through company benefits.

Steam. Ezra wrapped a grey towel around herself and stepped out of the washroom. She then walked across her living room, to where she pulled her thin bathrobe off a wooden knob, and upon herself. Working from home gave her the freedom to wear what she wanted. Ezra tied her sleek robe with a gold string belt. She turned to see the back of an old woman's head sitting sternly on her couch. Struck with disbelief and terror, Ezra froze. The uninvited visitor must've

entered before Ezra started her shower, she speculated. Perhaps it happened before she arrived home the night before. The figure was stagnant in the morning shadows, and distant enough for Ezra to think before acting. The figure turned ominously to reveal an old woman before Ezra could make sense of the situation.

“What are you doing here?” Ezra demanded nervously. The old woman said nothing at first. Instead, the stranger smiled gently at her.

“How beautiful...” The woman said to herself, while gazing at Ezra.

“Excuse me how--”

“Have a seat, dear,” The woman responded calmly. Ezra awkwardly tied her waist’s rope tighter, and complied with the visitor.

“What’s going on here? Who are you?”

The stranger laughed as if there was irony in the question. The two were now facing each other in the comfortable and pastel colored living room.

“They didn’t tell me it would shower,” the strange old woman said amusingly. Ezra was losing patience with the uninvited visitor, but also couldn’t resist a seemingly ingrained curiosity toward the woman. Perhaps Ezra was seduced by the obvious resemblance the two shared. The exception was that the old woman had a lighter complexion and rougher, leathery skin. Still, the old woman seemed to have a charm to her.

“Well... Now, I guess the newer models *are* waterproof...” The old woman continued, “I’m terribly sorry Ezra, where are my manners?”

“They will see you here,” Ezra nudged her head toward the security camera in the corner of the ceiling. The old woman ignored the threat and proceeded unbothered.

“Let’s see here. They told me this wouldn’t be easy. I, in a way, am a relative of yours.”

She paused. “Yes, a relative.”

“I’ve never seen you in my life.”

“Well, I’m afraid that was done deliberately. To answer your question, I entered with this key.” The old woman held up a matte black keycard.

“How did you get that? I have the only copy!”

The old woman sighed, like she was almost sorry. “I’ve always had a spare. Ezra?”

“What? What did you--”

“I have come to retrieve several valuable memories from you. As you can see, I am now an old woman. My sources say that I have maybe just a few years left. What I need...is just a few memories before I go.”

“There must be a misunderstanding here. I’m an Original. I was born in Mem--”

“Memphis, Tennessee, October 6<sup>th</sup>, in 2023. I know that’s what you think, Ezra. The memories you possess are artificial, direct copies of the ones I had when I was young. I heard about your boyfriend too, and I’m sorry.” The old woman was genuine.

“You don’t know anything about Wallace!”

“You’re right. I don’t know much about the last four years of your life, because that’s when I completed my Upload. What I *do* know is what my life was like before that...For the most part. My memory is a little dusty I’d say. You see, I need the data, and it will only take a second.” The old woman’s lips were flat, but her golden eyes smiled.

“Who are you really?” The Spare said to its Original.

“My name is Elizabeth Cole. I named you Ezra to give you a comfortable amount of individuality. My husband and I saved up to each have an Upload. I wanted mine in a Spare, and

he wanted his in a metal hard drive in our garage – he’s no fun. I thought I would give you better attributes anyway. Wider hips, softer hair, and dark smooth skin seems to be *in* right now.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“It will take no more than a few seconds.” Elizabeth said sternly.

“Will the memories just copy? Or is it a... Transfer?”

“I’m afraid the latter. Because I am taking memories from a Spare, they have no purpose being backed-up. Or sorry, I mean to say, I can only afford the transfer. I - I don’t like this any more than you do, Dear.”

“You can’t do this. This isn’t how people, die...” Ezra said with the closest thing to hope she had in her, and barely let out a tear.

“They make them so real.”

Quickly, the old woman lunged forward, chasing Ezra for what was only seconds. She grabbed the back of Ezra’s neck and pushed her thumb in, like hitting a pressure point. Before Ezra could retaliate, her eyes went from gold to a crème white. Her body, motionless. Though her body was limp, she quickly thought of Wallace. Not the way she remembered. The way he was. She remembered them laughing, toppling over each other in the yard. It was her favorite memory, the two of them enjoying the Saturday morning. Or was it... Sunday? She tried to focus on the old woman who held her neck. But who was she? What was she doing here? The only thing Ezra could do was look past the uninvited visitor, through a window, to see an old rope swing.