

Dreaming of a new dawn

Out of darkness comes a light, bright and blinding and full of hate. It takes time to unravel the web of sedatives, to probe the deepest layers of mist. Only once the eyes are opened, this light reveals no escape. This illumination brings only nightmares; pulsing, slithering torments that rip at the flesh and inflict horrors the likes of which no man should endure.

The waking nightmare lasts for an eternity, grinding in its longevity. It lasts until a hand from beyond, the accompanying voice from outside the nightmare realm, calls to Laurie and saves her from the brink.

“Laurie, wake up! Your transition is over. You don’t have to sleep any longer.”

Laurie opens her eyes for a second time, this time to a new light, not blinding, not intent on exposing her darkest fears. This time Laurie’s eyes open to Mathew, smiling at her from inside the architects flat, the sweat of his own transition already drying on his compassionate brow.

“That seemed like a rough one,” said Mathew. “Bloody awful that we have to wake up like that, but you know why they do it. Our synapses would wear down to mush

if we received nothing but pleasure. We need the pain to sharpen our wit. We need the nightmares to experience the Sphere.”

Laurie’s heart is racing, her hands trembling as she tries to forget ten thousand ants crawling across her skin. Mathew is always so fast snapping out of his transition time. It isn’t fair that he recovers so quickly.

“Whatever you see must not be as bad as what comes to me,” says Laurie, rising from the couch, the only piece of furniture inside the white room. She stretches and takes a lap around the flat, assuring herself that she has escaped the terror.

“I don’t know about that,” Mathew replies, his face noticeably paler as he considers the horror of his own transition. “I’ll give you that it’s a heavy toll, but for five minutes a day, to get us to what’s waiting, you know it’s worth it.”

Laurie doesn’t argue with Mathew as a metal door materializes out of thin air.

“Well,” says Laurie, “What are we waiting for? We might as well get started.”

Mathew is coming round from his remembrance of his transition, and rising from the couch, takes Laurie’s hand and pulls her in for a kiss. He holds her tight and smiles as they lock eyes, both partners ready to start the day.

“This is my favorite part,” says Mathew excitedly. “I love going in.”

Laurie lets Mathew open the door, knowing how much it means for him to go first, and follows after as they leave the bland flat behind. The door closes behind Laurie as she enters the Sphere, the world of all wonders beaming around her.

Through countless days and weeks and years, so many cycles that time has lost all meaning, everyday Laurie and Mathew enter the Sphere to a new dreamscape. From lush, Amazonian rainforests to the oasis of palm laden Saharan hideaways. From

mountains to beaches to intergalactic outposts, the cosmos laid bare as comets streak across the sky.

Entering the Sphere is always breathtaking. Today marks no exception.

“I could never imagine something like this,” beams Mathew as he soaks in the landscape, tears of joy running down his face. “However they think this stuff up, it’s worth every second of transition time.”

In front of Mathew and Laurie, deep turquoise waters encircle a white sand island. Teeming reefs offshore create mighty breakers as the sound of waves lapping on water greets them with the gentle breeze. The air smells of the ocean, of coconut and sweet vanilla.

The beauty before Laurie and Mathew is remarkable, but to discover just an island would make this day’s passage repetitive, a design flaw in the Sphere’s guiding purpose. Today’s cycle is more than just an island. Climbing from the center of the atoll stands a massive tree-shaped playground, the core of that day’s dreamscape and the Sphere’s glorious intent.

Rising higher than she could see, Laurie marvels at the miracle before her. The designers have bored out the interior of mighty redwood, the tree towering with all manner of stairways and walkways and hidden alleys and inset doors. A whole world of citizens surrounds the core, busy exploring the levels within.

“I have to give it to you,” says Laurie as Mathew pulls her forward, “This is pretty great.”

The mighty tree cast shadows across the island, the light drifting through branches like snowflakes falling in a forest. The party has already started at the base of the redwood, a band and dancing and drinks being had by all.

“You want a Mai Tai?” Mathew asks Laurie as a topless server passes with a tray.

“I think I’ll wait,” she answers. “Still a little groggy from the transition.”

Mathew shrugs, but in his eyes Laurie catches something more. There is a concern inside of a Mathew, a fear that Laurie is growing stale to the Sphere. His suspicion forces him to consider feelings he has written off, to worry over problems he has no desire to solve.

Laurie doesn’t wish to drag Mathew down. She certainly doesn’t want to lose him as a partner. Taking his hand and pointing towards the waves, her face lights up as she watches the mighty curl.

“Let’s go surfing! I feel like it’s been forever since we touched the water.”

Mathew jumps at this new endeavor, challenging Laurie to a footrace as he slams his drink and throws the cup back over his shoulder. Laurie nods, and without countdown laughs as she pushes Mathew back to give herself a head start. The crowd cheers and whistles as the race comes down to the wire. Laurie wins, reaching the water first as Mathew splashes in behind her.

Immediately, materializing at their feet, two surfboards appear out of thin air.

Mathew and Laurie walk their boards out to where the water rises waste high, and from there on out paddle the custom creations. Out beyond the breakers they swim, out to where both Mathew and Laurie straddle their boards and countdown for their set.

An added bonus of life inside the Sphere is the pre-programmed expertise that comes with any hobby residents choose to explore. Laurie feels like she has surfed so many times that she could do it without her programming, but she doesn't risk switching to her novice default mode as she starts swimming to catch her first wave. It's just so joyous to do a task perfectly, to feel the energy of the ocean beneath her, the breaking spray of the wave kissing her shoulders.

Mathew and Laurie surf until their toes prune up and their arms ache with delight, their final wave a burst of adrenaline that leaves them giddy and full of life.

Back on the beach, back under the shade of the mighty redwood, Laurie breaks down at Mathew's second offering of a cocktail. There is alcohol inside the drink, some coded version of alcohol, but Laurie has no standard by which to judge its potency. By herself she has read from libraries stationed throughout the Sphere. Accounts from Shakespeare to Hemingway to the Bible all talk about drunks and intoxication and even some nightmarish flu called a hangover, but Laurie has never felt these things. The Mai Tai she sips is fruity and cold and makes the world glow a different hue, makes her amorous and talkative and tingly with delight, but that is the extent of the cocktail. Even if she were to drink one hundred Mai Tai's, Laurie would never feel anything more than loose and excited and in love.

Looking around the party, it is clear that alcohol's potency does not satisfy every citizen. The day has barely started, but already some visitors are diving into debauchery as the effects of opioids and ecstasy and cocaine and psychedelics transport visitors to another plane.

People stumble or grind against each other on the dance floor. A couple has sex on the sand as citizens ogle them under the haze of the drugs. People laugh and giggle and lie on their backs, staring at the branches overhead. They do so much to escape their escape, losing themselves in a beautiful place.

Another server, this one covered in elaborate tattoos the merge and meld into each other, a living cartoon of flesh, walks by with a platter of pharmaceuticals. Both Laurie and Mathew decline. This resistance to heavy intoxicants is one of the cornerstones of their relationship. Mathew loves to drink, to chase adventure and make love, but even though these pursuits sometimes push Laurie further than she wants to go, they both agree that dulling paradise with drugs would defeat the purpose of the Sphere.

Seeing so many others who imbibe, Laure probes Mathew to leave the party.

“Let’s explore the tree house. I want to see what activities they have planned.”

Mathew is transfixed by the couple making love, but when Laurie rubs his shoulders, he snaps out of it and follows after her as they approach the trunk of the behemoth. Immaculate staircases lead up into the branches, into rooms and hidden bungalows. A multitude of doors offer all manner of entertainment.

On the third level of the playground, fifty feet above the beach and surrounded by rainbow-colored hummingbirds that land on Laurie’s shoulder and whistle her favorite tunes, Mathew stops at a doorway marked “History’s Greatest Battles” and points inside.

“You can choose next, but I say we go here first. It’s been a while since we’ve taken on a campaign.”

War games aren’t Laurie’s cup of tea, the blood and guts and machismo of the diversion, but she won’t let Mathew down, knowing he will let her choose second, no

matter how boring he finds her choice. Laurie only pauses for a second before entering, announcing her lone caveat for playing the game.

“Ok, but we have to be good guys. I don’t like it when we play for the bad team.”

Mathew consents, and entering, the simulation reads their mind as they find themselves decked in suits of armor and riding massive stallions, the guidelines for the battle announced before the war begins.

“Welcome participants,” booms the unseen announcer. “Today you join forces with William, Duke of Normandy, at the Battle of Hastings. Your objective is to defeat the Saxon army and establish William as King of England. Choose your weapon’s wisely as no less than the fate of the western world lies at stake.”

Examining the soldiers around her, Laurie selects a spear and sword from her armory. Looking over at Mathew, she laughs at the choice he’s made.

“You can’t use a machine gun at the Battle of Hastings,” she says.

“Why not?” asks Mathew, firing a volley into the air as the soldiers around him calm their frightened horses. “You know we’re going to win. Might as well have some fun while were at it.”

“Don’t you want it to be a fair fight,” says Laurie, “To not finish too early?”

Mathew frowns, the machine gun disappearing from his hands, replaced by a still out of era crossbow.

“I’ll ditch the machine gun, but I’m keeping the crossbow.”

“I have no objections to the crossbow,” says Laurie, the sounding horn signifying the start of the battle. “Once more into the breach dear friend!” she cries. “For England!”

Mathew and Laurie spur their horses forward, the smells of dust and sweat all around as they charge the Saxon front. Arrows fly overhead, striking the vanguard surrounding them, but every arrow that hits Mathew or Laurie does nothing but deflect harmlessly, clattering to the ground.

Mathew is ferocious as he drives towards the Saxon forces, a blood lust leading his charge as the bulk of his battalion are killed. Laurie is more methodical with her tactics, setting her archers in key positions, taking on the war games like a chess match. Both approaches are ultimately successful, and in less than an hour, the Saxon's are routed and Laurie and Mathew reign victorious.

"That was a blast," says Mathew, a bloody streak coating his armor, his crossbow, set across his lap.

"You want to get out of here?" suggests Laurie. "It's my turn to pick, and I think I know where I want to go next."

Mathew fires his final bolt into a rider ten feet in front of him, laughing at the holographic violence before the battle scene dissolves.

"Where are we heading?" asks Mathew, taking Laurie's hand and a fresh Whiskey Sour just outside the doors.

"I want to make a movie," says Laurie. "I'm thinking a good action with some romance thrown in."

Mathew sighs, but he is a good partner. Up one more flight of stairs waits the cinema, the smell of buttery popcorn wafting through the afternoon air.

Different from the war games and their set historic parameters, making movies allows Laurie to express her artistic voice. Entire plot templates are available for

citizens, cheesy storylines for those not wanting to challenge themselves. But Laurie, in another world, could have been a director, picking the right camera angle for tender moments, knowing when to cue the music for the movie's most climactic scenes.

Laurie chooses a 1950's crime thriller as her framework, the story of a down-and-out couple forced to break the law in order to survive. From there, her imagination takes over as the theater falls dark and Mathew chomps on popcorn.

Laurie will never know how much of what comes next originates from her subconscious, or where the Sphere took over in her stead. All she knows, all she wants to know, is that the film turns out beautifully. Even Mathew is quiet for the duration of the movie, saving only compliments for when the credits role.

"That was really something Laurie. Normally I don't like love stories, but how you made it about bank robbers, that couple having to turn bad to save their family farm. I liked how you put all that action into your film. And when the guy died at the end, I didn't see him being able to save his wife like that. You should be really proud."

Laurie blushes at the compliment, not accustomed to such flattery from Mathew. But it is short lived. Mathew's attention span, ever shorter inside the Sphere, has led him on to his next endeavor, dragging Laurie along as they continue exploring.

Mathew and Laurie spend their afternoon spear hunting Anaconda's in Peru, deep-sea fishing off the Great Barrier Reef, and hang-gliding down Mount Everest. This last feat is a golden oldie, but seeing the entire world from its highest vantage point continues to be a regular favorite for Mathew and Laurie.

Walking out of a simulation where they battled a fearsome grizzly bear with nothing but a homemade sling, Laurie is famished from the day's activity. On cue, the

smells of that evening's feast wafting up from below make her salivate as she imagines the waiting delicacies.

"I'm starving," exclaims Laurie, her hand rubbing her stomach as she nods over the railings down towards dinner. "Are you ready to eat?"

Mathew has downed forty plus drinks, enough alcohol that he isn't as coy as he imagines when his eyes dim down to bedroom lighting and he smiles his best come-hither grin.

"What do you say we go and work up our appetite just a little more? I don't like to have sex after we gorge ourselves. How about some bedroom theatrics?"

Mathew didn't have to explain what was on his mind for Laurie to read his desires. They had been partnered so long that Mathew's desires were a timetable Laurie kept with bookkeeper's accuracy.

The Sphere was designed to satisfy all human urges, carnalities included, allowing for sex beyond what the past constrained. Graphic simulations, gender reversal, physical enlargements and mechanization. Fortunately, compared to sordid affairs she'd heard of from other women, Mathew's fetishes were fairly standard. It was true that Laurie would never stand for the rape and torture fantasies enjoyed by others, but even still, sometimes she did wish that it would be enough to just be themselves. That intimacy, not lust, could fulfill their special moments.

"I'm game," said Laurie, slowly revealing her hand, "But how about tonight we forgo the simulations. What if we just have sex as ourselves, just you and me?"

Mathew played sport and considered Laurie's request, all for the better part of five seconds, before posing his counter.

“We will. Tomorrow, I promise. Tonight I was thinking we let the Sphere make us up a friend. Your pick, but let’s have her be something exotic.”

Laurie gulped her most recent Chardonnay and knew she was not destined to win today. If she went all in, Mathew would finish sooner and she could get to dinner. It was that thought that made her nod her head, that escape that allowed her to play along.

Thirty minutes later, Mathew all grins and sleepy eyes, Laurie and Mathew arrived at their beachfront table, their server dropping off glasses of their favorite wine as the evening feast was unveiled.

Architects outside the Sphere tried pairing evening feasts with the locale of that day’s setting, while always still accounting for individual taste and preference. Laurie was a more adventuresome eater than Mathew, and as a result, her offerings presented a wider variety of the ocean’s bounty.

For her appetizer, Laurie was presented with a bowl of shrimp’s head soup accompanied by a plate of sea urchin roe piled on a round of steak tartare. For her main course, fried soft-shelled crab served on a bed of red chili polenta made Laurie’s toe’s curl and her server run for two extra helpings.

Mathew’s dinner was more modest, an appetizer of shrimp cocktail and then a tomahawk ribeye, cooked medium rare. His dinner didn’t fit with that night’s setting, but the Sphere knew what would please him best. And happy Mathew was, finishing every bit of gristle and fat until he danced in his chair and smiled across the table.

Desert that evening was a shared course, a plate of gooey bread pudding topped with vanilla bean ice cream and the most decadent whipped cream Laurie had ever tasted.

The mound of sweets was enormous, as large as a watermelon, but neither Mathew nor Laurie worried as they stuffed themselves to the gills.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this full,” Mathew exclaimed, smoking his customary after dinner cigar and leaning back from the table.

“I know,” agreed Laurie, tipsier than she’d been all day from her three bottles of Prosecco. “This day has been amazing, more than I could ask for.”

“And it’s not over,” said Mathew. “We still have the fireworks.”

Certain that they couldn’t stomach another bite, Laurie and Mathew leave their table and stroll together on the moonlit beach. Bioluminescent starfish wash ashore with the evening tide. Soft sand crunches beneath their toes.

The band playing at the center of the island has started a different tune, this melody more somber as couples and threesomes and whole groups of people begin claiming their seats along the shoreline for that evening’s fireworks.

The standard curtain call of the Sphere, it is a sight not to be missed.

Laurie and Mathew choose a spot further away from the torches, and holding hands, lie back as the spectacle unfurls. Sophisticated and deliberate, the firework show is designed for maximum potency, a build up that each night is more elaborate than the last. For inside the Sphere, fireworks were not just a choreographed lights show of explosions and bangs. They were a symphony, a storyline, an epic for all ages.

This evening’s show began with a little girl, alone in a forest, walking along a bubbling creek. Out of nowhere, a mighty dragon descended down to devour her, but this was no normal girl. Blessed with a sorcerer’s power that enabled her to call to arms all the beasts of the forest, an army of bears and handsome Minotaur’s came storming to her

aid. The firework display showed this battle of creatures in startling detail, the little girl riding a mighty panda clad in bamboo armor as the Dragon Lord summoned forth his minions. The score from an unseen symphony accompanied the theatrics, the hoops and cries from the crowd sounding out at the most dramatic moments.

Mathew was fully engrossed by the show, but sometime around intermission, Laurie found herself restless. At the end of the display, every citizen would fade into a dreamless slumber, waiting eight hours until they were awakened for their transition before entering the Sphere's next creation. Before that happened, Laurie had one more simulation she wanted to visit, although she knew she would go to this one all alone.

"You're leaving?" asked Mathew, his eyes already half closed, a sure sign he would not make it to the end of the show.

"You could come with me?" suggested Laurie.

"You know I don't like that room. I've had a great day with you, babe. If I'm gone when you come back, I'll be waiting for you after your transition. Remember, it never lasts long, and tomorrow, who knows what will be waiting for us."

Laurie and Mathew kiss as the firework storyline resumes, the little girl's panda bear taken hostage by the evil dragon army. Laurie knows the story will work out in the end. She is more interested in visiting her favorite simulation, in experiencing something different than she has seen all day.

Waiting at the base of the tree, Laurie enters the only room in sight. There is no announcer to prep her for what's inside, no guidelines or armory or storyline to choose. Instead, standing in front of Laurie, basking in the glow of the setting sun is a quaint

house, painted blue and adorned with yellow shutters. A white picket fence protects the yard from the street. The pristine lawn dances with the gentle breeze.

There are no rules or decisions to make because this is a projection Laurie created long ago. It is the house she built, the one she's filled up on her own.

Laurie enters the home without knocking and is greeted by her bounding puppy Oliver, a fuzzy Golden Retriever who jumps and nibbles her hand. Laurie bends down and squeezes the dog, his tongue licking her ear as his tail swishes away.

"Laurie, honey, is that you?" calls a voice from the living room.

"It's me," Laurie answers, picking up the puppy and entering her den.

Inside the cozy room, Laurie finds Mathew, a projection of Mathew, sitting beside the fireplace reading some long-forgotten tome. This Mathew smiles at seeing Laurie, asking her about her day.

Laurie goes over and kisses Mathew, but although he is as much a part of this fantasy as Oliver or the house, it is not Mathew who Laurie has come to see.

"Mathew, dear, where are the kids?" asks Laurie, not seeing them inside the kitchen.

"I sent them up to get ready for bed," answers Mathew. "They should have their teeth brushed by now. I bet they would love to hear a story from their mom."

A tear rolls down Laurie's cheek, but this Mathew doesn't pester her by asking what's wrong. Bound to the constraints of his programming, he returns to his book as Laurie hears footsteps and the sound of sweet laughter coming from upstairs.

Laurie climbs the steps of her dream home as she looks upon a wall of pictures taken from places that never were. There are Mathew and the kids, skiing in Colorado.

Another frame holds a portrait with the entire family making silly faces. Pictures of the kids at school, playing with their friends, growing older and living such a normal life, stalk after Laurie as she makes her way upstairs.

The light from the kids' room spills out onto the second-floor landing. Laurie has to take a deep breath before she can go forward, readying herself to be her best. She throws on her biggest smiles as she opens the door wide enough for her to slip in, looking at William and Blakely, tucked into their beds and smiling back at her.

“Mommy!” they both cry out, reaching up for a big hug.

Laurie jogs over and squeezes both her children, holding them tight against her as she smells their hair. William and Blakely always smell the same, like sunshine and hand lotion, a perfect scent for Laurie to hold on to when she returns to the Sphere.

“Mommy, will you tell us a story?” asks Blakely, her tiger-print pajamas matching her cotton sheets.

“Yeah, Mommy,” chimes William. “Will you tell us a story?”

Laurie doesn't know many stories, only those inspired by her movies or ones she's borrowed from books she's read. Of course William and Blakely don't know this. Laurie suspects she could just make barking noises and they would still smile and snuggle her all the same.

Laurie doesn't test the simulation's programming, instead telling the kids a story about a boy and his dog that get lost in a forest. Blakely and William, spitting images of their parents, listen with wide eyes as Laurie tells them about a witch and a magic unicorn, and ultimately, how the boy and his dog make it back home.

“That was a great story,” says William. “I'm going to dream about it all night.”

“Me too,” Blakely agrees, always keeping up with her big brother.

A soft, ringing bell inside of Laurie’s ear reminds her of what she already knows. Back outside, the firework show is wrapping up. Her day within the Sphere is coming to a close.

“Alright you two little snuggle bunnies,” says Laurie, “Mommy has to go. You two sleep tight, and hopefully tomorrow, we’ll get to spend more time together.”

Laurie hugs her children once more before pulling the string on their lamp and leaving them for the evening. She doesn’t stop to say goodbye to Mathew when she gets downstairs. The real Mathew is outside waiting in the Sphere.

Laurie looks back at her home for one last second before returning, and as she does, she wonders if she would be happy staying only there. It is an impossible fantasy, but leaving her secret world behind, Laurie believes she knows the truth.

Out beyond the beach, the firework show is wrapping up, the battle between the armies ending with the hero’s charge. Laurie walks out to where Mathew was watching, but when she reaches their spot he is gone. Mathew has already fallen asleep, and doing so, has left the Sphere for the night, sedated into darkness until his transition calls him forth again.

Laurie is disappointed that she will have to fall asleep alone, but it is not her first time. As she lies back on the sand, closing her eyes as the orchestra plays its final song, she tries picturing what tomorrow will bring. The Sphere and all its delights never fail to amaze, a sensory overload that will always be.

As slumber overtakes her, it is not the grand wonders of the Sphere that Laurie’s mind goes to, but instead the house and husband and children she will never have. What

do William and Blakely dream of when she's gone? What worlds do they envision during their day?

Laurie falls asleep with the image of her children's fantasies running through her mind. She falls asleep hoping that they see so much more than her.

She falls asleep and vanishes, taken to the void.

Inside Container Pod B-174215, citizen Laurie Johnson trembles in her sleep. The IV bag running from her arm pumps nutrients and electrolytes and sedatives into her gaunt, one hundred pound body. Her hipbones and ribcage poke out from her dirty scrubs. Her fingernails curl and dangle from the mattress.

Laurie's partner, Mathew Waterset, is housed in a container pod four hundred miles away, the vast swaths of blowing sand between them eradicated by the technological marvel of the Sphere.

Laurie Johnson trembles despite her lack of dreaming. A heart rate monitor records her heightened pulse. No attendant remains to check her vitals. There is no one left outside the Sphere.

In eight hours time, Laurie will be transported by VR implant to her transition time before being released to another day within the Sphere. Outside that sanctum, the sun, the true sun, will rise and set as the nuclear reactors powering humanities last gasp wither one day nearer towards their collapse.

Whether the power stations give first, or the living skeletons they exist to support, is anybody's guess. Not a soul will be there to witness.

Not Mathew Waterset. Not Laurie Johnson.

Instead, they and all the other citizens will persevere until the lights fall dark. With no tomorrow to worry over, they are free to let their dreams go. The Sphere will serve them until the end.

After that, only the sun will rise again.

The End