

InWorld

His wife of twenty-six years died, and he couldn't get around to slipping the ring off his finger. I should, to move on, I know, he would tell friends, shrugging and smiling. But I just can't.

He started wearing the ring on the alternate hand as a halfway measure; the white, circular tan line visible on his left. He twirled it for minutes, while he talked or streamed television, never looking at the ring once. Sometimes, he'd stare at their wedding picture: two young happy people, dressed in standard nuptial formal wear, the hairstyles and Marvin's beard dating them as millennial newlyweds. In the picture Ann Marie, a plump blonde with a broad, pale face, smiles into the camera.

Ann Marie hardly complained about anything, had been blessed with health for most of her life. She thought the pain would go away, didn't think about seeing a doctor until the pain reached unbearable levels and her eyes and skin turned yellow. Less than a year ago, the doctors diagnosed the pancreatic cancer and started immunotherapy. Marvin recounted the visits to the hospital, the moments helping her in and out of the bathroom as she puked or after the diarrhea. Seeing her fade, as she became gaunt with hollow cheeks, her lively blue eyes larger than usual. She died seven months after the diagnosis.

By his own admission, Marvin was a simple man who didn't waste time thinking about things. He just wanted to forget this blow in his life by regaining a sense of routine. But he'd come home and the unexpected silence in the house felt weird. At first, he would blurt out something that happened at the post office as he walked through the door, expecting Ann Marie's

sarcastic response. At night, he continued to sleep on his half side of the bed. With time, the house relinquished every trace of her scent. He found fewer hair strings stranded on his tee shirts.

Her presence. The sense she was looking at him without looking at her or humming while doing some chore somewhere in the house. The face he knew she made when talking to one of the kids on the phone in another room. The footprints she left across the floor after coming out of the tub. All that, and more, disappeared. That was when he understood he was alone.

Meals were the hardest. Not only because he degenerated from Ann Marie's wonderful dishes to microwavable cuisine. For close to three decades his wife sat across from him at the table, and they talked about daily events in their lives. They shared small town gossip, laughed about funny past moments, discussed the latest about the kids and grandkids. Planned their future. It got to the point he hated to sit down and eat. They always made it a point to have a sit-down dinner. Even after the kids were gone. Marvin had gotten too used to it. He finally decided to eat in the family room while watching TV. Until then, he ate in the dining room, seated at a table for eight, feeling like the only one at the kids' table.

The silence coaxed memories to surface. He'd think back to a younger Annie, when they were dating. Or how they'd clean the dishes together after supper, talking some more. Now, he stared at the greasy plastic microwave container, panned the furniture, the forgotten pictures on the wall. Got to the point he couldn't stand listening to the digital wall clock tick. He started playing music after that, anything to break the cemetery feeling in the house.

It took a while before he invited someone over. Mike, his best friend and only company. Both served in the Air Force at the local base. Later, they both landed jobs at the Lakeville post office. Each was the other's Best Man. Mike was happy to see his friend being more sociable

again. He remembered the times Marvin came to work haggard, eyes puffy from sleepless nights and probably crying. Clothes unkempt and sometimes stained with Ann Marie's vomit. After she died, he just wasn't himself. He hardly talked, which was unusual. Marvin was always smiling and laughing, which was odds with his face—those lean lips and small, brown eyes overlaid with thick, droopy eyelids that made him look dour. At the post office, he had always been chatty and open with everyone. Nothing seemed too private or taboo. When he turned sullen and took too many mental days, it became a worry for everyone. Going postal is not just a catchy phrase for people working in the post office.

It was a hot August day and Marvin opened another two pale ales. They had just finished watching a Red Sox game. He slid a cigarette out of the pack with two yellowish fingers.

So, have you started going out again? Mike asked.

Marvin took a long drag and pumped out smoke rings.

Nah, can't get into it. That's a whole production, I feel. 'Sides—go where? Lakeville isn't exactly rockin'. And driving downtown to a bar full of wasted college kids? No thanks.

To be honest, he continued, been surfen' the porn sites. Checked them out while married, not gonna lie. But occasionally. Cause, Annie and me got it on. Never had a problem in that department. He threw a smiling glance to the side.

You turning perv on us, Marv?

Screw you, Mike. I'm talking normal stuff.

He pointed his cigarette at his friend. Let me make that clear right now. Anyways, yeah, I went on and got myself hot and whacked off. He raised his right hand. Guilty.

His friend laughed.

Hell, what else am I supposed to do?

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Nah, I hear you, man. It's been rough for you.

Marvin sat, looking nowhere, slouched against the sofa. He raised his thick eyelids.

Annie did this funny thing after making love, he said. Wrapped her right leg around the base of my back, near my butt, while she held on to my head. Sometimes we fell asleep that way. That's better than sex, any day. He sucked the beer suds and crushed his cig. Well, almost, he added, grinning.

One day, after hours of browsing, he decided to enter InWorld. He didn't know what to expect; didn't go to the website with any expectations. It was a typical, impulsive web visit. He was bored, running out of things to do online and he googled and found the site. He never had heard of virtual worlds until Mike told him about it. They were chatting about this and that, usual stuff, during the sort. Then Mike started talking about a movie where people lived through robots they controlled from their homes.

Sky's the limit with these robots, he told Marvin. You're young and sexy forever in a world where you can be free and wild.

Sure, Mike, Marvin said, it's a world called Hollywood.

Hey, it's not far from reality, he said. Look at InWorld.

Marvin had no clue, and Mike returned his dumb expression with a sigh, like his friend was the biggest moron in the world. Mike knew about all the computer cyber stuff, read a lot of sci-fi and probably had seen every possible sci-fi movie ever made. But even after explaining it to him, Marvin didn't understand. He filed it under 'curious but who cares' and got on with real life.

The website opened to a promo where you board a hover craft that flies through various places. Pixilated beautiful vistas of forests, mountains, beaches, deserts, international cities, the

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Wonders of the World, that looked like so real he thought he was viewing a travel ad. That's followed by a montage of people partying, dancing, kissing, hanging out, having a great time. With a smile, an amazingly realistic looking female avatar offered an invitation. *Adventure and opportunity await you InWorld...Begin your new life now...* The catch was that he had to buy a headset and special gloves. It was a bit steep and he thought about it. Days passed, but he kept returning to the promo, lingering over it, wondering if it could possibly be that real.

When he opened the package, he couldn't believe how small and light the headset was. It resembled a pair of sunglasses with a plastic strap that hugged your head. He hardly felt it on his head. The gloves lighter than your winter ones. Pressing a few buttons on the head set and gloves, his surroundings disappeared, and he suddenly transported into another space. A female avatar explained how to begin and then he found himself facing a floating screen with options for his avatar. He selected a rugged male avatar and named it Mark Cavatelli, because that's what he had for dinner. Once completed, he marveled at how every part of it looked real. From the small hairs on his hands to the textures of the clothing. Before, it seemed like he was a floating head, now he sensed an attachment to a body. He wiggled his fingers, jumped up and did a little dance. He fumbled to walk without bumping into objects, trying to learn how to navigate around the field of view.

Once he learned how to transport to sims, he began exploring. The attention to detail in the design, the beauty of the created landscapes, was impressive, sometimes breathtaking. Where they lived was so damn cold in the winter that the sim beaches naturally attracted him. The times he had visited family in Puerto Rico with Annie, they spent so much time at the beach that both got bad sunburns. He loved hanging out on a beach lounge, listening to the music he streamed,

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and scanning the area. The salty smell of ocean, sea birds gawking overhead, grains of sand stuck to his body. It was like being in a real beach.

At one beach, he got a message to lose his clothing or wear beach wear. He had transported to a nude beach, and a strict sim manager attached a big sign above him announcing to the world his violation. He panned around and saw naked avatars. Every male avatar had tanned muscular bodies with ripped abs and was anatomically accurate. After taking his clothes off, a feat requiring slow instruction and frustration, he discovered his naked avatar resembled Ken, as in Ken and Barbie.

Marvin covered where his privates should have been. A Foxy Gold sent him a message: Looks like someone's missing their hardware. When he spotted Foxy, it was a shocking discovery. There she was in her birthday suit, with bouncy breasts and butt, wavy blonde hair, and sparkling, big green eyes. She even had tan lines. He couldn't believe someone could put together a computer-generated replica of a human being like that. In comparison, his looked like a child's cartoon drawing of a person. He scrambled for the exit button and logged out.

The next day, he researched the anatomical possibilities of an InWorld avatar, which first led him to freebie sims, where designers dumped much of their junk as a marketing ploy. He was willing to accept any type of gift. Until he saw how cheap it looked compared to others. Marvin didn't want to walk around with a cartoonish avatar sporting a penis that resembled a digital representation of a dildo. He found out soon enough that like in real life, you get what you paid for, so he purchased some InWorld currency. He spent an evening jumping from one sim to another, buying a new and improved look for his virtual mini-me.

Through the magic of CGI and Marvin Correa's imagination, the updated Mark Cavatelli was digitally spawned into InWorld. He was tanned, broad chested, and tall like most avatars.

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Long, black flexi-hair framed a handsome face sporting a stubbly beard. His blue eyes markedly different from Marvin's brown. He looked like a male character on a romance novel cover.

He hesitated to buy a penis. He would go to sim stores—even a special mall to buy them—and look at boards with pictures of huge ones, advertising different types and prices, and he had to laugh. It was stupid and strange. Embarrassing, even. Once he got over the initial awkwardness, it was like buying a pair of sneakers or fishing pole or, more to the point, condoms at the drugstore. He shopped everywhere and then came across one that looked amazingly real. Marvin was overjoyed.

On a break, Mike asked, what was your first InWorld sex experience like?

Marvin sat back, pulled out a cigarette but didn't light it right away. He laughed, sipped his coffee, took a drag and shook his head.

Her name was Minnie Morpork. Met her at some club playing trance music. Brought her back to my apartment in virtual New Orleans. Finally realized you need a place of your own InWorld, if anything to have a place to dress, and you know, I've always loved the Big Easy. Anyway, we get to my place and she jumped on me. Had me doing all kinds of things to her. She's chatting away, telling me all kinds of nasty things. 'Stick your tongue in there, yeah,' or 'Bang me hard like a slut,' stuff like that. She came and, poof, left before I did. Felt kinda used, to tell you the truth.

Not even a cuddle, huh? You went back after that?

Did you give up after your first lame lay with Margery Mason?

Jeez, that was high school.

Don't matter. You were a virgin and InWorld so was I.

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Seriously, Marv?

Ok, so I was curious. And it felt—I don't know—liberating. Anything goes, and there's a shortage of fucks to give. I tried stuff I'd never do for real.

The sims Marvin visited those first months of exploration ranged from raunchy meat markets to trendy clubs or exclusive brothels. A slice of InWorld dedicated to licentiousness or sin, depending on how you looked at it. Like the nude beaches, where people pranced around exhibiting their privates. Each one with its own secluded areas for sexual play. Or dance clubs, which had good, sometimes live, music and were enjoyable just to chill and dance, and served as pick up joints.

Mike wished he had never mentioned InWorld to Marvin. Most days, he suffered for his big mouth during the morning sort. Marvin complained how pole dancers enticed you to watch them and tried to con you into giving them money. He elaborated on meeting the occasional escort. What's the point of that? he said. I ain't paying in real life, wasn't gonna start in any virtual life. Told one, Why pay. So many people just do it for free here. And she told me, it's the difference between getting the steak or the wrapper. I'm the steak, she said. He laughed and elbowed Mike.

During lunchtime, he'd continue. Mike was the only one left who would sit with him. Mike, last night, I visited a place called Bimbo Land. For real, he said, responding to his friend's incredulous laugh. That's what they called themselves. They have enormous boobs, outrageous big lips, ridiculously huge butts. They resemble giant love dolls, I kid you not. He shook his head. Their leader, Raegina Dentata, wore pink latex and matching kinky boots. She wore a head dress that looked like an upside-down butt. And she carried this staff with three spirals at the top.

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She told me, In this land, men are our guests, but they must do as we say. You must give yourselves to the Bimbos.

Why not? So, they undressed me and led me to a temple. All this time, there was this singing. It was this beautiful, sad melody. I didn't understand the words, but I couldn't stop listening. When the music ended, Raegina stared down into my face.

Would you like to try the Convertatron? she said. She pointed to a spinning black and white spiral. It will transform you, she said.

How?

It depends on you, she told me. That's the fun part. And she started laughing.

What else you got?

We can motorboat you until you surrender.

They laid me on a marble slab, and they did, every one of them. With those humongous breasts. My face took a beating, and I cried for them to stop after a few minutes.

Then Raegina yelled, Power to the boobs! The others answered, May they rule! And they kept chanting that way. Louder and louder. They went into a frenzy and danced around me, raising their arms, and gyrating their breasts and butts. It freaked me out, and I transported myself the hell out of there.

The Bimbos led to other stories. The crazy avatars wielding bats and striking people. Pregnant women, and the ones with babies. The angry woman who got a kick out of teasing men hitting on her. The bikini clad woman calling out the InWorld 'bitches and sluts.' The endless procession of Walking Penises—male AV's with perpetual erections—and their female counterparts, the Naked Nymphos.

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He recalled the woman flashing an erect boner who wanted to do him. Ah, ain't gonna happen, sweetheart, I told her. Then she started humping me.

You got your fancy types. If they IM you, ninety per cent chance you gonna get laid. Like this one I met at a jazz club where you gotta go all dressed up. She came on to me, looking fantastic in this fancy gown and took me back to her mansion on an island. I mean, this house had like gazillion rooms, the swimming pool, Jacuzzi, a Porsche parked in the driveway. She held my hand and walked me to a yacht by her dock. There, she stripped, and turned into a wild woman. She screamed things that made me blush.

That was weird, man. Not the weirdest, though. Not even close. There was this Afrodite Nerlman, a BDSM type. Now, I'm not into that kink. InWorld, after a while, you say what the hell and try anything. It isn't real, right? And what happens InWorld, stays InWorld. Maybe, it was the Goth look I had going on attracted her, who knows. So, I find myself paddling her, and she's yelling, You're my master. *Please* punch me. I mean, how polite can you get? I gotta tell you, Mike, I'm not that guy. I kissed her instead, 'cause deep down I'm a romantic. She freaked out. Why you being nice to me? she asked. Then, piff, gone.

On any typical day, he picked up something to eat at a drive thru and drove home excited to immerse himself in the fantasy. For months, Marvin explored every corner of the virtual world, mostly wandering through the sexual confines of its digital boundaries. Other times, exploring other possibilities. He joined a vampire coven, then quit. Too much drama, he said. It was like high school all over again. Then a pack of Lycans. The avatar was cool, he admitted, but that also grew old. Fought zombies, dragons, and dinosaurs. Lived in a cyberpunk society and ancient Rome.

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He visited fun type places like the amusement parks or special theme sites. Checked out the educational sims, the museums, the dance clubs and music venues. Even dropped in on a Salsa club. He had never done that in real life. Growing up, there wasn't music in the house, unless it was religious. Ramona, his sister, used to sneak off to the clubs in New York, always lying that she was going to study or something else. She tried to teach him how to dance Salsa, but he was hopelessly bad. When he moved upstate, he became a fan of country, bluegrass and rock. Ramona used to make fun of his redneck tastes in music. So, when he entered Club Coqui, it was a new world.

The music was intense and loud. Colorful neon palm trees everywhere. Behind the DJ table, a gigantic coqui—the country's beloved tiny frog—smiled and winked. Everyone sat at tables shaped like the island. The avatars packing the floor danced tightly, spinning like beautiful figurines. He smiled as he remembered his sister's frustration in trying to teach him the steps. Poor Monsie, he thought. The many times he stepped on her feet. On one session, she wore Doc Martens. Even with the clunky shoes, she showed more skill than he could ever have. How can you be a Rican and not have any rhythm? she'd said. Like this, she'd shout, grabbing his hips and shaking them for him. It wasn't like he didn't want to learn. He often wished that he could because it looked like fun, and the couples were so graceful.

Hey, this is InWorld, he thought. I only need to ask a partner to dance and with a few screen taps, we're on the floor. So, he asked a few women, and they declined. Too much like real life. Maybe he wasn't dressed properly. He had on a pair of jeans, shirt and loafers. The women wore evening dresses or elegant slacks and tops. And bling everywhere. The guys had jackets or slacks rather than denim. He searched his inventory and changed.

A brunette in a green dress sat alone at a table, so he asked her. I don't dance with gringos, she said. He almost corrected her but held back. Why should he? He didn't need to defend his ethnicity to anyone. Besides, he understood Puerto Ricans harbored ill will toward Americans, even after independence. He had family with similar sentiments. He scanned the club. Everyone was chatting in Spanish, and he couldn't make out everything being said. Even if he could dance, the vibe wasn't there. Could he even have a decent conversation if he had a partner? He noticed he was the whitest looking avatar in the place.

Instead of transporting out, he decided to take a walk outside. The club was in virtual San Juan. Walking the blue ballast streets of the historic, old sector of the city brought back memories. The few times he had visited the capital when the island was called Puerto Rico. The colorful houses lining the narrow streets were faithful to the originals. The air was sultry, and he could hear the music emanating from the club. He crossed the Plaza de Armas. To him, it seemed a replica. The fountain in the middle, the green kiosks, the benches and trees lining the plaza, the surrounding shops. They even had the multitude of pigeons. Was it like he remembered it so long ago? Or were his memories too distant and estranged?

He left virtual San Juan and never returned.

One day it hit him. Whatever pleasure he was getting from these virtual erotic escapades was not enough. Not that they could not be intense and gratifying. Sometimes they were incredibly so. He had read on the InWorld blogs how the sexual roleplay wrapped people in an emotional and psychological bonding that, by most accounts, is genuinely intimate, keenly arousing and passionate. He had experienced that at times.

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But one night, he casually entered InWorld. Transported into one of the usual haunts and brought her to the new condo, fully furnished with the most advanced toys. He doesn't remember her name, but she was pretty. Curly blond hair, falling to her shoulders. Plush, glossy lips that broke into a sly smile. She was not afraid to own an avatar with curves. He appreciated that. Her cornflower blue eyes had seized him the moment he saw her at the club.

It was more romantic than most outings. Lots of kissing, caressing, holding. The sex was slow, deliberate, meant to linger and enjoy. When she left, he logged and shut down the system. He straightened his pants, zipped up. Then settled back into the recliner and smoked a cigarette. Surrounded by cigarette smoke and darkness, Marvin heard the silence in his home.

What am I doing? What was I thinking? That kept repeating in his head. He didn't want to hook up with anyone from InWorld. A few people did that. But he was a widower, and he thought most women InWorld, if they were women, would recoil if they saw his real appearance. This virtual world presented a stage, where Marvin could only be an actor, forever.

All along, I knew it was fake, even when it felt real, he confessed to Mike. They were at their favorite watering hole drinking on a Friday, after bowling. But it started feeling too real, you know what I mean? I don't know, he said, his face contorted with confusion. It seemed unnatural to love something like that so much. Mike listened, partly relieved, but also saddened for his friend.

Got to the point *I started feeling fake*, he said, not just my avatar, but me, my entire life, everything around me. The only thing not fake were the people behind the avatars. He took a sip of beer and smiled. People are the same, Mike, very real, even in a fake world. There are serious people, funny types, brainy geeks, greedy people, sex addicts, posers, artsy folks, all types. Even when anything goes, some can't let go. They won't shed their fake clothing in a sim beach.

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They're embarrassed by the sex. Others hide behind their avatars. They use the fantasy and freedom to be insensitive, cruel assholes.

Marvin avoided InWorld. Started hanging out with friends, and one night Mike set him up. Sheila was a widow, a few years younger than he. Worked at the nearby college with Mike's wife, Stephanie. Mike and Stephanie suggested a double date and ignoring the bad high school vibe over such an outing, he met them at an Italian restaurant.

At first glance, Sheila was a pleasant enough woman. Slender, not bad looking. Shoulder length brown hair, obviously bleached. She had a tight smile, as Marvin remembered, and upon a closer look wrinkles that gave away not only her age but her sad life. The evening was enjoyable, without any spectacularly awkward moment, so they decided to continue seeing each other. It didn't last long.

Sheila is one of the saddest people I've ever met, Marvin told Mike. I liked her, really, I did. And God knows, I'm lonely. But she hardly smiled or laughed, that woman. She carried this grief with her, everywhere she went, you know? And she wouldn't open up about it, whatever it was. We went out a few times. Typical stuff, dinner, movie, drinks. Nothing interested her. After one night of drinking, we came back to my house and had a go at it. It was like we were both virgins again. She was as stiff as a board. Her skin felt like thin paper to me. She was trembling and cold. Painful for her, cause, you know, not enough lubrication. I couldn't keep it up. He laughed and shook his head. We didn't finish. It was kinda pathetic.

After staring at his hands on the table for a few seconds, he said: She just made me sad, Mike, and I had enough of that. I wanna be happy. I wanna laugh and die laughing. He tapped

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his box of cigs on the table a couple of times. Nothing there for me but emptiness. I hate to say this, but I got off more InWorld.

After the Sheila episode, he brooded. Watched TV. Bowled a bit. Went deer hunting with the guys. Visited his daughter, Alison, downstate in Albany a few times; his son, Chris, down in the Bronx. Chris's Bronx was gentrified, with Starbucks and fancy restaurants sprouting everywhere for the recently arrived hipster 'settlers.' He had blurry memories of the Bronx, which ran through his mind like a bad ghetto flick. He grew up there when neighborhoods resembled bomb sites and drugs were easier to find than an opened library.

After joining the Air Force right out of high school, Marvin was stationed at the air base upstate. That's where he met Annie. He married her and that's when the problems with the family began. His mother never accepted Annie. Complained that she was too fat, made fun of her paleness and her small teeth. Thought she wasn't good enough for him. Criticized the 'indecent' clothes she wore. Every time he brought her to visit was like jumping from a plane without a parachute into a minefield. It was always awkward because they couldn't communicate. His parents spoke little English and Annie didn't know a word of Spanish. He hated having to translate everything, or worse having his sister Ramona mangle the meaning of everything. Annie had a proud streak to her, too. It's not my fault, they don't speak English, she would tell Marvin.

The big blow-up came when Alison was born. Annie wanted to baptize her in a Catholic church. Her parents were strict Pentecostals who believed Catholicism was a false religion. That their followers, mundanos, are not of the spiritual world. Annie got her way and no one from the family came up for the baptism. That upset his wife, who felt no matter the issues they had, family should stick together. Damn, that's their grandchild, Marv, she told him. He couldn't

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argue with her. He never looked back to the city, or his family. Marvin's parents retired to the island and moved into what Annie called a shack. The last time he saw them was when they visited Puerto Rico and spent most of the time at the beach.

The family referred to him as El Gringo, but he didn't give a damn one way or the other. Chris updated him on the family drama he didn't care to hear. The latest gossip had to do with Ramona's recent squabble with her daughter Brit. Chris couldn't believe his father hadn't seen the video with his aunt dancing half naked. You must be the only person in the world who hasn't seen it, Dad. He shrugged. His sister was always wild. The entire family was a bunch of lunatics. The happiest moment in his life was when he left for the Air Force.

He would come back from those family trips drained, in a funk and lonely. To keep himself busy, he returned to an old hobby of building car models. The latest, a '52 El Dorado. He did that for a while, hanging up his collectibles on shelves he cleared of past family memories. That couldn't kill enough time between work and routine chores to deaden the deepening silence swallowing him. At Mike's insistence, he hung out a couple of nights at a new local bar with other guys from the post office. That got stale after a while, especially when he would end up alone at the bar, watching guys go home to wives or with girls they picked up.

Eventually, he logged on again. He was watching TV and nothing caught his attention. He flipped channels like a zombie and turned the damn thing off. Slouching on the couch, he stared at the headset and wondered how things were InWorld. How his virtual friends were doing. If any new sims had sprung up. He entered with the idea of giving Mark a complete makeover. New skin, new shape, clothes, hair, new everything.

He hit the adult sims again but soon grew tired of them. He was fortunate to meet a lovely, friendly blonde, Cindy. Together, they shared a big house in a resort. On the weekends,

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Mark threw parties for his InWorld friends and neighbors. Today found him grilling burgers and franks while talking to his best friend, Rick. Rick Montana had served in the Air Force, and his folks were Puerto Rican. They had both those things in common, but they met at a motorcycle racing event. Cindy floated in the pool, sunbathing, and chatting with Lou's wife, Gina. The Montanas had kids InWorld, something that Mark and Cindy had discussed. Their kids were splashing water in the pool.

Hey, cut it out, Gina yelled. Oh, they're only kids, let them have fun, Cindy said. Gina stared at her. You must never have had kids in real life. It's the same here, believe me.

Mark grabbed two beers from an icy cooler. He slid into a lounge next to Rick, handed him one. Out toward the mountains, the Arizona sunset brought spectacular colors. Burnt orange mixed with yellow and purple. He breathed deep and took in the warm, desert air. He sat back and let the sun and beer drift him into that hazy serenity he loved. Cindy waved to him and he threw her a kiss. He held out the bottle to Rick. To life, he said.