



## Summer Issue



## Virtuality

**IVY GOODMAN**

He knew how she'd react. She'd press her lips together, and her round face would become slightly more oval, like a gibbous moon. She'd look away, not reproving, but isolated, beautiful, and brokenhearted. He'd try to hug her, if she'd let him. He'd say, "Katie, I'm really sorry," but he didn't like to grovel when, for instance, he had to stay late or travel overnight for his job. He liked his job.

But this was different. He'd blundered. She thought problems through with intricate refinement. I can't unless but first and then—immobility. He was direct. This is what I need, this is what I'll do. And so he'd booked their foreign vacation in the wrong place without thinking at all.

Sorry, we're full. Sorry, sorry. Recommended hotels in their budget were more like guest houses that you had to contact individually only to be pinged back: sorry, sorry. Each one kept referring him to another, always with the same bad luck. But then the Eyre popped up again, at a somewhat different address. He thought, it's part of a chain, and it must have had a cancellation, "only one, price nonrefundable."

He paid for the room and felt happy, but then he panicked. We'll remember this, he thought. If they married, as they planned, they would laugh over it in

old age. Or else he hoped they'd survive the trip and wait to break up at home.

Onscreen, where he'd found the Eyre's exact location, the cartoon figure floated off the map's legend and spirited him to a photographic image of an urban street. The audio was startling: shouting in a patois he couldn't understand, a truck grinding gears, gunning engines, the high pitch of bad brakes. But he didn't remember turning on the sound. On either side of the road were two-story buildings with big bright merchants' signs nailed to their facades: "Cash and Carry," "Off-License," "Sweets," "Carpets," "Appliance Rental." The Eyre beckoned from a narrow stairway beside a grocer: "Rooms to Let." An attorney also had offices upstairs: "Prison, Immigration, Family, Vice." Several storefronts were shuttered in corrugated steel. Others overflowed with inventory on the sidewalk, racks of gauzy shirt sleeves, giant upright rolls of carpet padding fused from brightly colored bits. Two pedestrians wearing long white tunics had been halted by the camera mid-gait. A man in a baggy business suit approached them with disinterest, no farther or closer, on a parallel vector. Either they were overheated or the woman in short-shorts and a camisole was underdressed. Her face, like all the faces, was obscured, as smeary as a thumbprint, framed by auburn ringlets. But she was facing forward, jutting her hip, idling there, one skinny arm outstretched. Her male companion, hands in his pockets, leaned against the wall in a languid, semi-seated pose, and the audio rang with the couple's laughter.

Did they say it or did he? It was a question that drew on the same stereotype from opposite ends: What was he doing there? But he wasn't *there*, and thankfully neither was Katie. She was still at work, and he was home early, at his desk in their bedroom, looking at a panoramic photograph taken in the recent past. So the mocking two weren't exactly *there* either. And yet the sound of that laughter drove his gaze downward as he moved beyond them and turned the corner, or as the viewfinder did, lurching vertiginously until it refocused on the open garage door of a car repair shop and those few battered vehicles parked haphazardly in front of it. From within, he could hear twanging music and the intermittent roar of an air

compressor. He navigated to the right, off the curb. Down the length of the street, two lines of attached gray houses narrowed into the flat distance, as uniform and dismal as railroad ties. It was a littered, unswept place, no street trees, no window boxes. All the grass must be in the cemeteries that he remembered green on the map. This was where people lived and worked, where the most enterprising gave up their front rooms to commerce. He saw a hair salon, a fortuneteller's, an herbalist's with a dented basin on her front stoop. The educated great-great-grandchildren of an earlier wave might soon move in to displace the latest poor, but they would never come here on vacation.

He had the absurd passing thought of discovering an ethnic restaurant to share with Katie, but soon he forgot why he was lunging on. Anxiety compelled him and the screen itself. He supposed he was safe enough near the commercial blocks, but he knew unassuming urban streets could mark momentous boundaries, and if he strayed too far in the wrong direction, he might as well break down the door and trespass into someone's living room. Toughs punished fools for their stupid mistakes, and tourists were so very ripe. Were there no others equally as stupid, dressed for the hiking trail or the athletic field, carrying guidebooks with their titles in full view, huddled near the curb, bickering over maps? Or were they, too, invisible?

It was just a game, he realized, like those primitive first-person versions in which the protagonist took corners blindfolded and couldn't bend his legs. No wonder he felt lost. But damn, he hated losing. Somehow he'd erred, and he was now racing past the storefronts at a blurry, phantasmagoric speed. Hoping to slow down, he clicked on a roll of carpet padding propped outside a shop, and fused bits of padding, like neon fruitcake or mortadella, overtook the screen, as if the stuff were up against his face. He clicked again and managed to zoom out. The next time around, he grabbed for a gauzy shirt, and the whole rack skated toward darkness within the store. The entire screen went black, and a blue whirligig spun. Was he defeated? He didn't know.

In dreams, elaborate, prolonged misadventures can unfold in mere seconds of sleep. Maybe that was also true of the game. He couldn't have said how

long he'd been playing or how long he waited before a white circle opened in the middle of the darkened screen. The circle blinked and expanded slowly, as if the screen persona were opening his eyes. He seemed to be lying on his stomach, and that must be his pillow, that looming dented grayish white mound. The picture wobbled with the noisy bedsprings and a crackling undercurrent of plastic.

It had been an awful night. He didn't know how he knew, but he felt it just by looking: the bed had been as hot as a car parked in the sun; the pillow was filled with sand; the sheets were singed, and the air still sharp from past guests' cigarettes. Hadn't he seen the modernistic headboard and nightstands in an advertisement for the Eyre before he paid for the room? Up close, veneer was peeling off the compressed wood, and the unwieldy all-in-one structure reminded him of an old office cubicle. Behind it, someone had left a set of chalky fingerprints on the bright red wall. He'd been told he had the same unconscious bad habit of touching walls and leaving smudges. But it was impossible to measure if the span matched his own.

A bit of paper was visible at the lower corner of the screen, and the camera, as if tracking his thoughts, immediately dropped to the nightstand to reveal a photocopied page titled *Local Attractions*. "Browse the largest selection of counterfeit 'designer' apparel, electronics, and entertainment in the region." Beside it was a tabloid newspaper, its pages skewed, the dateline hidden. "Knife Crime Up. Chief Pooh-Poohs Bloody Buses. 'Women are surprised by their menses more often than you'd think.'" Was that supposed to be a joke? The audio, meanwhile, had picked up the sound of running water, not from a bathroom, as he'd supposed, but from a kitchen, or kitchenette. The camera led the way, navigating left.

A woman with her back to him stood humming at the sink, and he recognized the sound of happiness in those few sweet bars. She filled a glass with water; she turned off the tap. Her hand flicked at her shoulder, and the gesture rippled through her hair. Katie? Sometimes he felt so close to her that he forgot she was someone else, separate, apart from him. That's who she is, he thought now, as if he'd caught her unaware, by

chance, in an unexpected place, and the yearning was even stronger and stranger, on finding her inside the screen.

He sat up in his chair and the screen persona, too, inclined toward her, but suddenly the camera jerked, the view shuddered, and he felt it simultaneously at his desk, not just empathy or nerve memory, but the real exquisite pain of stubbed toes, those near-twins in the middle of his foot, between the big one and the pinkie, hypersensitive all out of proportion to their size. He winced and hunched his shoulders, and so, it seemed, did the screen persona. Were they both shoeless? The camera leveled, and her face and pale throat swirled out of the shadows. “So you didn’t fix that broken tile?”

“I didn’t have a chance.”

The male voice—was that his? It was jarringly reminiscent, but also jarringly unlike. It was not how he thought he sounded, just as his image, when caught in amateurish videos made by friends, was not how he thought he looked. But the woman’s voice was something else. The woman’s voice was very, very close.

Her hair swung again, and the room reabsorbed her. “Dinner’s on the table. Meats and sweets,” she said. “I cooked, I chose.” The camera moved toward a small table where fruitcake and mortadella lay in alternating slices on an old plate, closer and closer, like the threat of being force fed, until the darkness spun over it.

When the light came back, he recognized the loud commercial street. Onscreen, a woman was walking quickly past the storefronts in a long black robe, no, a coat, a long black raincoat with an upraised squarish hood. Between her shoulder blades, a single pleat belled out, tenting her in darkness to her ankles. He couldn’t see her face, and the hood hid her silhouette, until she slowed and turned, as if she’d heard him thinking, calling to her. Yes, it was Katie.

He remembered her elderly aunt offering that coat from the recesses of a closet, unworn, in Katie’s size, tags dangling, years out of style, a “good

coat to wear in a toxic ash storm,” they’d whispered afterwards. Katie accepted it politely and tossed it at home, but now, onscreen, she was inhabiting it, peering out. Her face was in its oval phase, her lips in that faint annoyed unkissable pucker. She’d hidden the expressiveness of her hair. “What took so long? You forgot, didn’t you?” Her intended auditor seemed to be almost entirely off camera, at the screen’s edge. Only the smooth skin behind his ear and his curled obtruding ear rim were in focus, but then the camera pulled back. She was like a denizen in a movable tent, but he was wearing sneakers, low socks, cargo shorts, and an old college T-shirt. It was himself, or an imposter. Was this a twisted prank? Had a hacker observed and stolen them? On the street, featureless people hurried by in both directions, some in western dress, some in long scarves and robes. But only he and Katie had faces.

For a moment, vanity was foremost, and he stared at himself. Even his stance seemed out of place. He recognized his usual slowed response to being pushed, as if all the urgency were Katie’s problem. He could see how it made her angrier. What had he forgotten? Another chore? Sometimes he remembered, sometimes he forgot, but his parents hadn’t minded much when he was growing up. He always said he would, sure. It was as simple as checking “yes” on a disclaimer box in order to go on. In the end, the more serious failure was the other person’s, the disappointed person’s, if she lost her temper with him. Maybe he was late, but there he was now. Wasn’t that enough?

They’d both grown up in loving, doting middle class families. But romantic love was more selfish. Or was he wrong? He wondered if screen Katie, too, called her mother every day from the virtual world. At that instant, his screen self blurted out, “How’s your mom?”

Her disbelief tore into him and filled the screen. She shut her eyes, but her mouth stayed open, and her single anguished word echoed in his head: “What?” Yes, truly, what, what, what? How could he have forgotten, and how could find out what had happened? Maybe it was better not to know. Was her mother sick? Dead? Alive but inaccessible from the screen world? Were his parents likewise “dead,” too? Was Katie in mourning clothes?

His screen self reached for her. "I didn't mean.... I said it wrong. God, I'm sorry. How are you?"

She opened her eyes. "Not here. We don't have time. We're late."

Their images blurred and a blue graphic whirligig spun them into the dark. They were deep within, he was at his desk, and the blue blades were an emblem of the process, the artifice or possibility. As he studied the screen, it began to brighten slowly, from dark to dim. His eyes adjusted, his depth perception improved, and he realized those poorly differentiated horizontal stripes were the risers and edges of steps. The camera was tentatively ascending a stairway, not a ladder. Above, closer now, a wedge of daylight showed through an open door.

When he saw the room, he immediately knew where he was. He remembered the second-story office that neighbored the Eyre. Carnavalesque signs loomed outside the crooked sash windows on the far wall: "Carpet," "Sweets," "Appliance Rental." But the serious words were painted on the glass in reverse. A man wearing a shirt and tie—the lawyer, he supposed—sat at a wooden desk, and screen Katie and his screen self sat across from him, on the wrong side of "Prison, Immigration, Family, Vice."

He held back in dread until the camera jostled him over the threshold of the shabby room. Now, he shared a vantage point with his screen self, sitting next to Katie. Across the desk, the lawyer wrote steadily on a ruled pad, leaning forward on his elbows and glancing up now and then up as if to question or clarify facts. His face was featureless and misted over. Only Katie answered him. Hers was the higher, more distressed murmur. But he couldn't understand what anyone was saying, and the static just got louder when he turned up the sound. Did the audio depend on his screen self listening in? The camera showed him in profile, looking straight ahead as if he were lost in the labyrinthine pattern of right angled lines embroidered on the lawyer's tie.

Was he guilty of a crime? Two? More? Was he falsely accused? Did the printed documents on the lawyer's desk pertain to deportation or divorce?

Why was this idiot masquerading as himself? And yet he felt a tenderness, despite his disavowal. Daydreaming to the accompaniment of the human voice was another habit they shared.

His screen self stirred, and his wooden seat, loose in its pegs, shifted left and right under him, like a jaw moving disturbingly side to side. He stood up, and the camera pulled away.

“Sir,” the lawyer said, loud enough to clear the static. “Sir, would you please sit down?”

Screen Katie turned and said, “This is what I mean.”

At home, at his desk, he was now looking on from what appeared to be a fixed position on the lawyer’s wall. His screen self had begun to walk around the room, whispering to diplomas, certificates of licensure, several with currency notes tucked inside their frames. All at once, his chin and nose filled the screen, thrust foremost, distorted by proximity, and yet muted, as if by a dusty, double layer of glass and the shadow of typography on his skin.

“Help,” he whispered, and again, his open mouth blowing a kiss with the “p.” He tipped his head minutely back and rolled his eyes upward and to the left, as if to gesture over his shoulder at Katie and the lawyer. “Help. Please.”

But how? He didn’t know if his screen self was innocent or guilty, he didn’t even know the charges, and yet he couldn’t bear to let the screen go dark and leave a version of himself entrapped. And Katie? He wasn’t sure.

From the desk in their bedroom, he heard the distinctive whine of the front door’s hinges and Katie’s voice calling to him. “Hi! Did you find a hotel?”

He pictured her setting down her bag, unbuttoning a long black coat, and swinging free her hair. Her face was happy and round. What should he tell her? That they’d been halved or doubled or maybe shattered into bits and pieces yet to be discovered? Even if he wasn’t fooled, he felt haunted. He followed the sound of footsteps and the rhythm matched, one set tapping down the hall from the front door and the other across the lawyer’s office.



"Dave? What are you looking at?" In their bedroom, she bent near, resting the weight of her arm on his shoulders. He smelled her floral muskiness; her cheek was next to his. He looked at her and at the screen and watched the two women squint at each other in that familiar way, as if through drizzle, annoyance, or the dust and speckles on the glass. He said, "We're already there."

## About the Author

Ivy Goodman's short fiction has appeared in *Washington Square*, *Epoch*, *Witness*, and other literary magazines and anthologies, including *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*. She has also published two collections of stories, *Heart Failure* (University of Iowa Press, 1983) and *A Chapter from Her Upbringing* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2001). Her recent work has appeared in *Hobart*, *A cappella Zoo*, and *storySouth*.

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**"Windsock"** Robert Boucheron

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**"Virtuality"** Ivy Goodman

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**"Scott's Porridge Oates"** Paul Gray

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**"Personal Development" Michael C. Keith**

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**"There was a Knock" Peter Marsh**

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**POETRY**

**"Two Dirt Roads" Jacqueline Jules**

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**CREATIVE NON-FICTION**

**"A Daihatsu Doctor" Roland Barnes**

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**"I Eat a Sea Mammal" Richard LeBlond**

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**"Musical Chairs at Lakshmi Lodge" Olga Pavlinova Olenich**

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**"Safari on Mors Island" Knud Sønderby (Translated by Michael Goldman)**

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