

Experience

Diego Woodward

You sit on the train tracks and watch as the black smoke figure ahead of you grows. Its shrill whistle screams out at you, begs you to reconsider, but you're motionless. A sense of terror grows from within your gut 'til it nearly overflows. That figure keeps nearing, its form gets clearer and clearer. The definition is pristine, you can practically see the conductor yanking on the brake hoping to spare your life, you feel nauseous. And then, well past the moment of no return, the steam train plows through you. You can hardly notice it knocking you back onto the ground before the fuzzy sensation of your flesh being torn to shreds under its wheels and hooks consumes your body. Without the pain, it can best be described as ticklish.

You rip off the headset and wipe your brow, chuckling nervously.

"That's too real! That felt like the real thing! Oh my goodness I thought I was gonna die!" You shout, and your friends all cackle. Your name is Colton, and you're spending a weekend at a friend's cabin, but instead of enjoying the wilderness, you've all decided to immerse yourselves in something a little more novel.

"My turn!" shouts another of your friends, and your vision fades to black.

You take off the glasses and shake your head. "That was terrible. Stupid Oscar-bait. Wow, amazing, technology has come so far. I'm an artist, I will not resort to cliches like that. My art is going

to change the world!" Your name is Axel, and you're going to be one of the greatest experience writers alive, one day. You feel yourself filled with inspiration.

Edwin flicked off the experience and rolled his eyes.

Wow, another best-experience winner right there. You're so right! It totally is like Inception! I never thought of that! Christ, you'd think living your entire life in someone else's experience would make these people write something interesting, he thought. I did get called out a little at the end there. I guess I should rule out writing about experiences themselves, unless it's actually gonna be interesting.

Edwin took a deep breath and closed his eyes, then opened them again—a routine reality check he performed whenever re-entering the real world, though this time it didn't feel very necessary. Still, it was a good habit to maintain, as he'd been taught since he was a child, like brushing your teeth. Telling the difference between realities is like being asleep or awake. If you aren't thinking about it, if you aren't pausing to ask "Where am I?," you'll forget where exactly you are. But if you take that moment, telling the difference is as easy as breathing.

Edwin cleared his throat and went back to business. He scrolled through his list of experiences to try until he found The Marvelous Life of Miles Martin, and scratched it off. What a waste of time,

he thought. Then, his eyes gazed over the rest of the intimidatingly long list as he tried to decide what kind of feeling he felt, what kind of story could match his mood. Still, much like life itself, an experience is difficult to qualify with words alone and impossible to predict, so Edwin didn't bother reading into himself too deeply. Julia, he settled on a story that caught his eye, Julia, I hear that one's good.

Down where the water meets the tips of the leaves, you find yourself here again. You turn to your right, and there she is, like all the times before. Julia. She smiles a light smile, and the weight of life is lifted repeatedly. You slowly shift your gaze back to the lake, and see spots of birds drift across the sunset sky and dip down to where the hum of insects warms your mind. You take a deep breath, and close your eyes. You open them again, and redirect your slurred gaze to Julia beside you.

"How do we know this is real?" You hear yourself ask as the autumn leaves behind her drift all together like a hundred paint brushes coloring an expressionist's canvas.

"We don't," she says.

You laugh, and look down at your feet. The cool air breezes past the tips of your ears—you just feel so light.

"But I know that I love you," Julia says.

You feel your heart soar and you laugh like a hot cup of tea on a frigid day.

Edwin flicked off the experience and jolted up off the couch, running his hands through his hair. He paced around the coffee table, shaking his head. He stopped at the fourth corner and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. It's fine,

I know this is real. It doesn't matter. He sits back down. It's fine. He couldn't stop picturing her, Julia, the intensity of the feeling he felt towards her. He felt an electricity throughout his upper chest, a general anxiety. That was too much, way too real. He lay down on the couch. Normally it'd feel dissonant to attach so much emotion to someone they hadn't introduced yet, but for some reason it fit so perfectly. How did they do that? Was it something to do with the whole surreal feeling? God, I wish she was real. I wish that whole situation was real, it was just so... sweet. I deserve to be that happy. He sat up and shook his head one last time, then scrolled through his list again and settled on an experience without really considering it further. Veteran's Rebirth. Sci-fi. Cool.

You cry down from your space-copter as you feel your planet collide with this nameless world. Agony, agony sinks into your soul as you realize you'll never again see General Grawl, the only man you've ever loved, after this moment staring down at his glossy eyes in the rubble below. He just keeps getting further away from you and there's nothing you can do but watch.

When you can see him no longer, you look up to the stars and cry out "GRAWLLLLL!!!!" as you fire your mega blaster off into the cosmos.

Three days later, you find yourself walking up the steps towards Soldier Vernkot and Professor Kipple, standing on a stage before a roaring audience. You feel the weight of three long, bloody years on your shoulder. You feel the weight of years at the academy, years of choosing to do pushups and steroids instead of

playing video games like all the other boys. You feel the weight of the lives of Grawl, and Eckle, and the unforgettable Skiff. It's all been leading up to this. You step forward as Kipple brings the medal forward, and he places it over you so it sits upon your worthy, massive chest.

"Captain Charles T. Baker, you have saved not just our world, but many, thanks to your brave sacrifice." Vernkot says, and the audience cheers.

Pride floods your system. Finally, you can rest.

Edwin flicked off the experience. Three years, god damn. Wow. That was kinda corny but still actually fantastic. Shit, that last battle was so fun, they really pulled everything out for that one. I was on fire! Love when they really tap into the thrill of the kill. He chuckled to himself. It might be interesting to use that feeling for a morally questionable character, actually, he thought as he emptied out his tear valve and checked his watch. 10:16. I've still got the whole night left before school. Alright, tonight's a research night and then I start writing some tomorrow. I should really try pushing myself, that last one was three years long but it was totally awesome. Edwin went through his list to check off Veteran's Rebirth and immediately scrolled back to near the top of the list. Hills of Water. 65 years long. The last one was a long one too, and it was fantastic. I'm ready, I might as well. It's finally time. Edwin took a deep breath,

closed his eyes, and opened them again. Shit, I forgot to do it last time. It's alright. He sighed. Maybe I should check on my parents first, it isn't good to be lying still for so long.

He got up from the couch to walk down the hall to his parents' room. He could hear the sound of a movie being played inside. As he approached, he felt a warmth come over him—not a physical warmth, but an emotional one. There's a shadow in the corner, just around the hall closet, a shadow big enough to conceal someone. He stops and gasps a little, trying to fight back a grin. Julia. He stepped closer, and then another step, and the shadow revealed itself to be nothing but an empty wall. Nothing there. The warmth flew away along with that ambiguity, like leaves in the wind. Edwin took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and opened them again. He walked down the rest of the hallway. Two knocks, then he opened the door.

"Hey guys, just saying goodnight. How's the movie?" he asked.

His mother shifted up in her bed at the sight of him. His father was already asleep. "Oh, it's good. Kinda confusing, they were in all these different dreams and now there's these people that think they're still asleep. Also one of them is a detective? I think? I don't know, it's kind of hard to follow. But it's interesting."

"Sounds interesting. Alright, well goodnight."

"Goodnight. Love you!"

"Love you."

Edwin's father mumbled a "Goodnight", eyes still closed and still on the border of some shallow dream.

Edwin walked back to the couch and scrolled back through his experience service to find Hills of Water. Okay, here goes.

And so you lie there, in your soft, wiry mattress, looking up at the light and letting it blind you. You feel someone hold your hand; you can hardly spend the energy to look to see who it is. But the chance that it's Annie crosses your mind, so you find it within yourself to look. It's Joan.

"Joan... where's Annie?" You whisper in a voice you can hardly believe is yours. It's so hoarse, so frail, it's an embarrassment anyone can hear you like this.

"Annie's not coming, dad."

"Oh."

"I'm here for you, I'm not leaving."

"I know."

"I love you."

Your eyelids feel heavy. You find yourself drifting away, back down that river, back over those hills, to the City of Lights, to Julia.

"No, I'm not ready to go," you say.

You feel someone squeeze your hand and say "It's okay."

In the boat beside you, those wrinkled eyes, that crooked smile, you see Elias.

"Elias."

"Elias?" A voice from some distant

place asks.

You look back forward and watch those waves drift over themselves under that shimmering night sky, and you can't help but feel relieved.

"He's finally here with me."

Edwin lurched off the couch, the experience flicking off on its own as he fell to the ground. He stays there, lying on the carpet, staring at its folds and threads. He sniffles. The tear valve was leaking, filled to the brim and begging to be emptied, but Edwin doesn't feel like doing anything at all. A tear rolls down his cheek. That was heartbreaking; I can't believe they did that. It makes sense, but Annie... That was brutal. I don't want to believe it. He sniffled. He wanted to take a deep breath, close his eyes, but he isn't ready for the real world. Not so soon after.

There's no rest, you're just in one world and then out in another, he thinks.

The soft, cotton candy cloud cushions your feet with every leap you take.

"To the castle!" You cry, and your teddy bear friends shout and giggle in agreement behind you. The steps feel slow, so you take out your candy cane and melt a path out in front of yourself. The steps are more solid, you're gaining more ground. That gingerbread castle has never before been this close. You look behind you to check on your teddy bear pals, Julia apparently among them: their faces are bright, they're filled with glee and anticipation, but their expressions shift to concern when they see

you reach the end of your little candy cane path. You look back down at that cotton candy cloud, and then at the castle. Who lives at the castle? The princess? You remember the cloud, how soft it is, you remember what it feels like to fall, and you feel yourself smile as you take a step forward.

You plummet off the path, down into the cloud, through the cloud, and into the open sky below. That funny feeling of a sudden drop fills your gut, and you spin around in midair to see you're just heading for another cloud. You land face first, immediately soothed by the wisps of humid candy. You take a deep breath and smile as your friends all fall off their own place above to join you on this new plane.

Edwin flicks off the experience and feels like he's sinking into the couch. A goofy grin just will not wipe itself off his face; this is bliss. The couch, the hallway, the area is all the same technically, sure, and yet it's all bubble gum now. Anything dark about the world just can't hold any weight in a room like this; it's not like it's been smothered, or pushed away, just lifted up with balloons high enough that there's no fear of anything crashing down. Having had this much fun so far, there's no need for Edwin to stop now. He immediately looks back at his phone and picks a new experience at random. Jack-O-Lantern. This one's supposed to be kinda spooky.

You limp down the hallway, beaming from ear to ear. You feel so filled with glee you can't imagine ever sinking back into that depression again. And to think all you had to do was stop trying so hard. A trail of blood has coated the floor, an interesting new snaking pattern back and forth between each room, almost dry at this point.

You turn the corner to find your masterpiece. Your sister's body on the kitchen table, your brother's underneath, his mouth still wide with horror. And, above, hanging from the chandelier, mother's head with its eyes carved out and a smile

stretched out over her cheeks, the candle on her tongue is flickering, dying, the glow in her eye sockets dims.

It's a horrible feeling, the deep down sadness mixes with the laughter like lemon and milk. You gulp down the tears with giggles, and think it's a little more like oil and vinegar.

Finally, the world is bright again.

You flick off the experience and stumble off the couch and towards the kitchen, letting your feet drag. You pour yourself a glass of water and hyperventilate between the gulps.

Shit, you put down the glass, the water splashes out onto the counter. You take deep breaths and shut your eyes. You open them. It's not working. You close your eyes. He opens them. Deep breaths. My name is... Edwin. He thinks. He opens them.

"My name is Edwin," he says, "and I'm going to check on my parents to make sure they're alive."

Edwin walks out of the kitchen and back down the hall to his parents room, trying his best to ignore the shadow where Julia stands. He moves his hand to the doorknob and slowly, precisely creaks the door open just a sliver, and then a little more, just enough so he can look through the crack into the room. The TV was turned off, the only light that showed his parents' figures being the rays of moonlight let in through the curtains. And, when it came to the figures themselves, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. They were asleep, Edwin could tell from the snoring. Their bedsheets were dry, not a bloodstain or any sort of spill that could be anything like blood, nothing. Edwin watched them for a few more seconds, waiting for any changes, any sign of a struggle, any sign that he'd done something horrible. Nothing changed.

He slowly, carefully shut the door and turned back to the hall and walked back towards the couch. As he does so, flashes of Jack-O-Lantern play in his mind. He stops. The bedsheets, there was

something on them, wasn't there? Just out of the moonlight, where there was just darkness, there was an area of the bed that was darker than the rest. An area that looked... wet. Edwin turns back around. The snores—they too! There was something about them that was different. Not like regular snores, more wheezy, more bloated, more like they were... Edwin shakes his head and walks a little faster. I'll just check one more time. They're probably fine.

He creaks open the door again, a little faster this time, a little less carefully. He scans the moonlit bedsheets, and the area just beyond. No, it wasn't wet. There were no slips, no spills, no stains, nothing. The snores, though loud, were just snores. The regular kind of unremarkable snores. He hears his mother groan. Is she hurt? No, wait, I just opened the door too loud, shit. Edwin carefully shuts the door again and walks back down the hall to the couch. I need to talk to someone, I'm gonna call Silas.

"Hey man, what's up?"

"Silas, I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"Whaddya mean?"

Edwin shakes his head, "I mean not actually, but the experiences are getting to me. I just went too hard and I need someone to tie me to reality. I just did Jack-O-Lantern..."

"Bruh I told you not to do that one, it's not even well written."

"I don't care how well written it is! I just still feel like I killed my family and it's hard to even tell if I did or not!"

"Okay, well I haven't been to your house recently but I'm gonna guess that you probably didn't. You just need to chill."

"I mean, how do we know this is real?"

"I don't know. We don't, I guess."

But I know that I love you.

"Okay, does that not freak you out?"

"What?"

"How can you tell the difference between an experience and reality?"

"The size of your bank account?" Silas laughs so hard his mic cuts out.

"Seriously! What is reality?"

"Bro, it's not that deep. It's like you're asking what AI is. Like, everything? Nothing? Who knows? Who cares? Reality is all of it, all the stuff is reality. That's it. And there's no point in trying to draw lines, at least that's what I think."

Silence fills the room.

"I can't tell if that was helpful, but I'm leaning towards no."

"Yeah, whatever. Go take a walk. Touch grass. Get some sleep. Goodnight."

"Night."

Edwin grabs his keys and walks out the door, almost forgetting to put shoes on before he turns back around and throws on a pair of sandals. The cool night air hits him immediately, a wave of relief. A little bit of nature should be nice. He already has a place in mind, a place he hasn't bothered to return to in years. He feels a breeze brush the hairs on the back of his hand, and it feels sweet, euphoric, almost too good to be true.

Down where the water meets the legs of the dock, Edwin wanders along the meandering path he used to take with his mother when he was a child. So close to where he lives, yet so distant from his realm of awareness. He sees the moonlight drape the tips of the leaves, the things he just wouldn't notice on any other day. It feels like a dream, like a wonderful dream, I miss Julia. Julia isn't real, you think in the back of his mind, but he shrugs it away. In a way, she is. She's here with me. He takes a deep breath of that humid summer night, it's like he's inhaling a part of himself, and exhaling. A peaceful moment in a tranquil atmosphere. I deserve this. It's okay. He closes his eyes, and opens them to find yourself on cotton candy clouds. You sink into the soft air and

open your eyes once more.

Down where the water meets the tips of the leaves, you find yourself here again.

“But I know that I love you, Edwin.” Julia finishes.

You feel your heart soar and you laugh like an award at a galactic ceremony, like a candy cane plunge, like a Jack-O-Lantern, like she’s beside you. The wind rustles the leaves above your heads and paints the world’s canvas all around you, you squeeze her hand, you breathe in, you breathe out, you close your eyes, keep them closed, and smile.