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Viv hates her job.

Every morning at 8:15, she leaves the concrete walls of her bachelorette pad, rides a rickety elevator downstairs, sets off to work downtown. A half hour later, the lenses on her eyes light up with routine words:

**Now arriving at Tech Row Station**

She trudges with Hudson's masses up the clean white stairs of Tech Row station, through the labyrinthian subterranean of service droids and sulking office drones, up the escalator to street level.

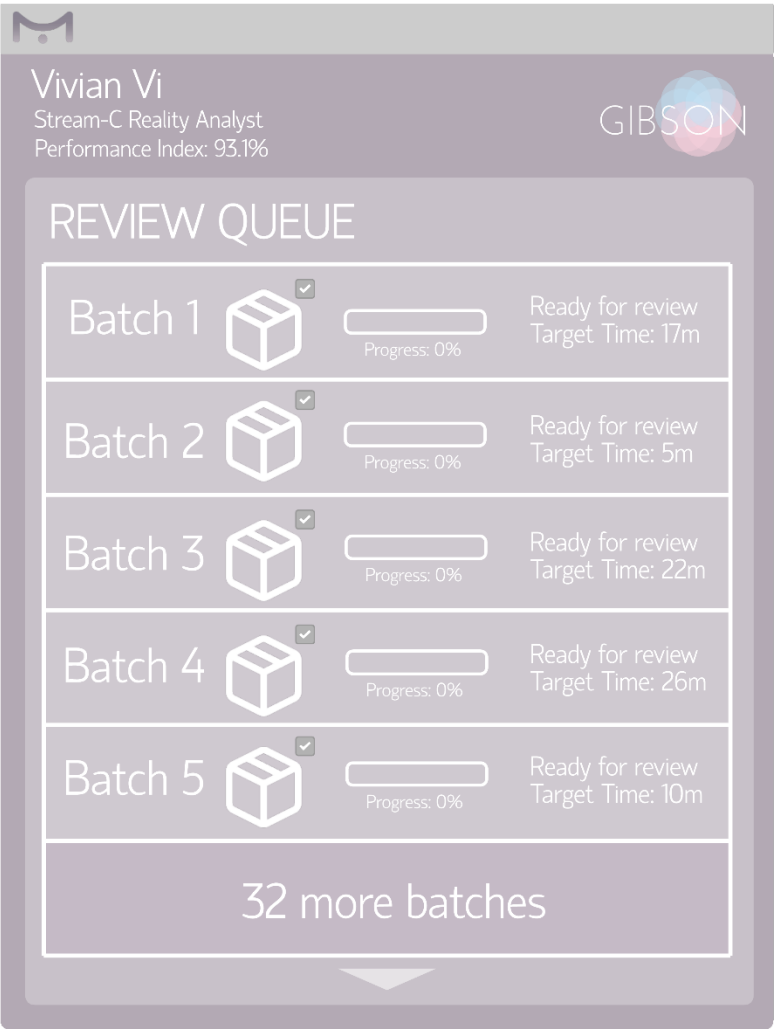
The rush hour walk through Tech Row Plaza gives her life. Drones fly their fares through unseen airplanes overhead. Virtual billboards plaster glass monoliths flanking the plaza. Droids, humans, figments of virtual reality blend together, surreal morass. Personalized ads for new music and production apps scroll across faces of skyscrapers. Virtual avatars dance, sing, perform in mixed reality, their designers in faraway places hoping to make a quick cred from the work-weary passersby. Their setlists change every day, rotate every month. Viv knows their routine well. Some days, the bright virtual lights and brightly costumed dancers are the only things that preserve her creative spark, the only things that keep a smile on her face.

She hates her job. She'd rather be making beats, crafting reality filters, designing new backup dancers for her new set.

Every morning at 8:55, she takes an elevator up to the fourth floor of an unremarkable glass tower along the seam of Tech Row Plaza. There, she takes a left to the testing labs of Gibson Analytics, where the receptionist says the routine words: “Good morning, Vivian.”

Viv puts on her smile for the day to as she returns the droid’s greeting. “Good morning, Andrea.”

Every morning at 9, Viv sits down in her dull white cubicle and syncs her lenses to Gibson’s company wifi. Her review queue for the day appears:



She sighs. The queue seems to get larger every day.

Her virtual assistant, Terra, is poorly designed. Terra’s voice has little human quality. She drones on and on in Viv’s earbuds, reading from the same script,

over and over, asking Viv the same questions of every virtual object that pops in augmented reality for Viv's review.

"Vivian, how *real* is this object?"

On her first day, Viv was excited to be rating every object. "I think that's a nine, Terra," she rated a bouquet of violets, stems floating midair in augmented reality. "The petals look plump enough, the color looks right, the rendering of the stems fades into the background smoothly, but something feels off about the way they're sitting in the wrapping paper. The physics *feel* wrong."

As the months dragged on, Viv's enthusiasm to be working with Terra dwindled. Last September, Viv circled a golden retriever, panting and running in place in the middle of her barren cubicle. "Vivian, how *real* is this object?"

"Five. Fur isn't shiny enough. Animation is weird, legs too wobbly. Run cycle is too choppy."

Back in July, Viv sat at her stool, staring down a soldier's thousand-yard stare.

"Vivian, how *real* is this object?"

"Ten. Looks good."

"Vivian, *why* does it look good?"

Viv shrugged with a smile. "He looks traumatized. Big eyes, good emotion. Big trauma."

No telling what oddities could show up in the review queue. It adds a flicker of joy to the routine, like last week, when Terra flagged a cube for Viv's review:

"Vivian, how *real* is this object?"

"Terra, that's literally just a cube," Viv said, still smiling. "Just cube. Blue. You know cube? Cube? Six sides? Box?"

"Oh, okay. I understand, that's *cube*. Vivian, how *real* is *cube*?"

"I don't know, it's a cube." Viv's smile finally receded. "What's this even being tested for, a game? Reality filter? Show?"

"Vivian, please rate *cube*."

“One, I guess.”

“Vivian, *why* is *cube* a one?”

“Because rendered cubes like this aren’t a thing in the real world. Why is this being flagged for my review, how am I expected to analyze this?”

The poor design of Terra has played a leading role in making Viv hate her job.

Adding to Viv’s frustration, every morning at around 9:30, her boss comes by her cubicle to remind her how to do her job, pretending she cares about Viv’s work-life balance.

“Morning Viv,” the routine always begins.

“Morning, Rain,” Viv always replies.

Then, Rain says some variation of: “The system flagged lots of objects for you to review today. Big client. Their product’s graphics need to be 10 out 10, ult real.”

“Happy to help, Rain,” Viv always says with a smile.

Then a question or two about Viv’s side hustle as a producer, how Viv’s work on her new set is going, how’s the commute downtown from Huron Heights, maybe about how Viv’s landlord has been treating her.

“It’s great,” Viv always says with a smile.

“*Real* good, *realreal* good,” Rain will say before excusing herself to go tend to another one of her team’s reality analysts.

And with that, it’s back to the review queue, punctuated by a brief break for lunch. After work, Viv takes her smile off and rejoins the shuffling masses of Tech Row station. If she’s lucky, she might have some energy left by the time she gets home to make new beats, write new lyrics, maybe plan some new choreography for her set. Sometimes she’ll even message a few friends. Usually, though, she’ll squander her evening browsing new VR experiences, rabbithole down the metaverse for a few hours, then pluck the lenses out from her eyes to call it a night.

And that's how it goes, every day.

Every morning, the routine remains the same: Algorithmic entwinement, the artist spirit consigned to a life within the lines, slight variants in the routine her respite. Her poetry is confined to passing thoughts, reflections. Her soul too tired to write. Underpracticed, her rhythm and rhyme weaken, her songs no longer a source of pride. Day by day, her follower count steadily declines, and every day, her work at Gibson drains nine hours of her life. But she needs the credits to survive, needs to eat, needs to keep renting her overpriced room in Huron Heights. She cries. She must set her ambitions aside. She refuses to go back on Basic, refuses to return to a precarious hover above the poverty line.

So she pledges her service to Gibson Analytics, their review queue filled with machine-unreadable objects that Terra needs Viv's human touch to interpret. She becomes one with Terra, ruefully. She serves Rain dutifully. Vivian Vi, Reality Analyst at Gibson Analytics: She permits her spirit to be mechanized, her mind to be routinized, her imagination dulled by insidious reality, incessant prompts to rate and review.

Yes, that's how her life goes. Every day of it.

Until today.

Viv devours a slice of toast and leaves home at 8:30. She's going to be late for work. Today, she's too tired to care. Today, both of her building's two elevators are broken again. Building management refuses to spend money on new elevators. She can't afford the rent at any other building in the neighborhood. She shrugs, takes the stairs. Life will go on.

Twelve stories later, her feet hit the streets. When she reaches Tech Row Station thirty minutes later, the lenses on her eyes light up with routine words:

Now arriving at Tech Row Station

Above ground, the mid-spring sun scorches the tiles of Tech Row Plaza. Viv strolls across the plaza, around the crowds drawn by dancing and singing avatars, through the parkettes overrun with virtual flowers.

In the elevator up to the testing labs of Gibson Analytics, headlines scroll up the wall in virtual reality:

Stocks rebound from yesterday's flash crash

After Sphinx attack, experts fear new era of  
"runaway threats"

With world on edge, Unity Party sinks to new low-  
point in polls

Maya unveils OSX Beta version, touting new "meta-  
metaverse" experiences

Viv's desensitized herself to the news media's all-out assault on her sensibilities. She has no control over this runaway world, so she can't worry herself over it—she has enough to trouble staying in control of her own life. She puts her smile on, purges the headlines from her head as she walks through reception, greeted by Andrea's routine words: "Good morning, Vivian."

"Good morning, Andrea," she says with a wave.

Viv walks on autopilot to her cubicle, connects to Gibson's company wifi, loads up her account. She sighs—huge review queue today. Sometimes, she remembers how excited she was for this job when she first interviewed with Rain: Work with a state-of-the-art system as a Reality Analyst! Rate and analyze the virtual objects of top tech companies, including Giga and Maya! Now though, she only wonders why she went through the trouble of spending four years on a reality design degree for this job.

She loads up the first object in the queue: A sweaty chef barking orders, spatula raised to the sky in fury. Viv quickly notices that the edges of his lips become grainy and pixelated as they move.

"Vivian, how *real* is *flustered chef*?" Terra asks.

The morning flies by in a blur of tedium, each object in the queue more unexceptional than the last:

“Vivian, how *real* is *burning kitchen*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *firefighting drone*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *magic wand*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *race horse*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *living room*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *hummingbird*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *lamp*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *antique bookshelf*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *magical tome*?”

“Vivian, how *real* is *enchanted forest*?” Dazzling greens pop into reality all around Viv, bursting through her routine. Her false smile fills with sincerity, her eyes sparkle beneath the bright forest rendered on her lenses. Glee and wonder. Tall, taupe trees tangle around one another’s snaking roots. Golden glitter sprinkles down from the sunlit canopy like warm snow, as plants and flowers in every color of the rainbow gush from the trees and the lush grass below. Neon birds and tiny fairies aglow, fluttering between branches, the air filled with gold, chirps, teeming with magic. Viv marvels at the vines crawling over her feet, the verdure surrounding her, mixed feelings of déjà vu and anticipation—like she’s been here a million times before, wants to come back a million times more. A scene from a vivid dream, burrowed beneath her waking memories, where anything could happen next.

“Vivian, you have not yet responded,” Terra interrupts. “How *real* is *enchanted forest*?”

“Give a sec, Terra,” Viv says. “I . . . need to process all of this.” Viv examines the forest in more detail, scrutinizing the illusion now, but there’s not a single defect in sight. This could be the most convincing reality filter she’s ever seen.

She wants to live in this, even if only for a few precious moments. The forest's colors are so intense, they completely mask the dull white of Viv's cubicle in the background of her vision. The fine textures of the smooth tree trunks seem perfectly tangible. She can smell the fragrance of the flowers, taste the sweetness of the berries, feel the warm sun, just by looking around at all of it. It's almost like the filter was handcrafted just for her. She walks to a branch brimming with fresh raspberries, looking for even the slightest sign that they're a digital forgery of reality, but their fuzz catches the sunlight just right, their red pearls are brilliant, dew drops cling to some—impeccable attention to detail.

"This filter seems *very* real, Terra," Viv says. "It's beautiful." She reaches out to one of the berries, hoping the filter is sophisticated enough to let her pick it. Her fingers press up against its warm fuzz for all but an instant: the berry bursts into a blotch of blinding light as the trees, vines, birds, fairies, all of it explodes into a bright flash, the entire forest dissolving into a sea of blazing white light, engulfing everything, stinging Viv's eyes, forest soundscape drowned out by screeching white noise, piercing Viv's ears.

Viv freezes, cringes. Stunned. Overloaded. Infinite light, infinite sound. "Take the tech out," her instinct says. She plucks the lenses from her eyes, buds from ears, brightly glowing and horribly buzzing in her palm as the drab grey of her cubicle returns, the ringing in her ears remains, eyes watery, overhead lights blurred. Disoriented. Confused. She takes in her surroundings—the forest? Where did the forest go? It seemed so—

"Ay Viv," a hurried Rain bounds into the cubicle, "real problem, are Gibson's systems working for y—oh, cute top," Rain points with a long, acrylic fingernail at Viv's brightly sequined blouse. "Is that real?"

"No."

"Oh, cute render then, fooled me," Rain says. "So, systems are down for you too?"



“All my tech just glitched out.” Viv holds her palm out to show Rain, still shaking in confusion. “Lenses stuck on max brightness, buds all whitenoisy. I think Maya crashed.”

“Fuck, fuck.”

“Is everything okay?” Viv asks, eyes glassy and dazed.

“Hold tight a min.” Rain storms out of the cubicle, leaving Viv to sit and sort her thoughts out. How did the forest seem so real? She’s seen so many filters, but there was something so special about that one? Who made it? Why was it assigned to her instead of one of the more senior analysts? Why’s Rain so scared? Why did everything crash so suddenly? Is her tech broken? Is she going to have to shell out a whole paycheck to replace it? Is this happening to the rest of the team too? She glances around at the lifeless grey walls, wishing the forest would return, looks down to see if her lenses look usable yet. Glow’s faded from them. She slips the thin plastic lenses back under her eyelids, pops the buds back in her ears, rolls her fingerprint across the white ring on her pinky, but the system won’t restart.

“Ay Viv.” Rain slides back into her cubicle. “Your tech back?”

“Uhhh,” Viv stammers, rolling a finger across her pinky ring again, “the brights and buzzing stopped, but now Maya won’t restart.”

“Fuck.” Rain clicks her tongue, snaps her fingers. “Thought that’d be the case,” Rain says. “Okay Viv, you take off for the day, ya? Go grab an early lunch and head out.”

“Serious?”

“Upstairs is telling me to let ya’ll out. Some kinda incident they gotta sort.”

“What’s going on?”

Rain laughs. “C’mon Viv, you know Upstairs won’t tell me *that* much.”

“So I can just ... go? Do whatever for the aft?” Viv smiles at the thought of her escape.

“Yep, you’re free, Viv. We’ll buz you with an update later.”

“Okay,” Viv nods, masking her excitement as best she can. “See you tomorrow then, Rain!”

“See ya, Viv.” As Rain slips away to the next cubicle over, Viv’s systems reboot, stuck trying to integrate back into Gibson’s systems, their logo suspended in midair endlessly, taunting her, beckoning her to leave the office before Rain has a chance to take back her offer:



Viv closes out of Gibson’s systems, her view returning to normal as she snags her tote and bolts to the elevators. At long last, a day off.