

Butterfly.exe



AUSTEN TUCKER

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COLOPHON

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Butterfly.exe

by Austen Tucker



“**W** hat if you forget about me?”

→ “What if you forget about me?”

Start over

Sherry looks at you over a datapad. All uploading candidates are required to step out of sim for at least 24 hours before the procedure, mostly for pre-op prep. Even still she has one finger tapping away at the keys.

Keeping up with your friends on the inside.

She wears a hospital band on her wrist and a morgue tag on her toe. You can't stop looking at them both. Back when you were a kid doctors made people better. This one had one goal: archive. You can't stop thinking and wandering. You ran through it with her before. You're even going to upload after her. Still, hard to think that this is the last time you'll see her.

Her head is shaved and the doctors have scribbled scribbled lines from ear to ear, neck to nose. Soon a surgical saw will run through these points one after another. Her head will be a watermelon served in summer. The computer will swallow her in deep, suction-assisted gulps.

Then her head will be empty.

"I'll never forget you."

"I can't do this."

→ “I’ll never forget you.”

→ “I can’t do this.”

← Back

Start over

She smiles at that. “That really helps, sweetie. I know we’ve been on this path for years but it’s still hard. I’m... here! It’s not a dream anymore, or just another appointment with the docs. It’s not saving for the costs, or making budgets for when our only costs are server fees. It’s happening. Now.”

“I’m going to die tonight. I should be happy.”

I want to join you.

“I don’t know if I’m comfortable with this.”

“I need some air.”

→ I want to join you.

→ “I don’t know if I’m comfortable with this.”

→ “I need some air.”

← Back

Start over

You can't. You just can't.

Intellectually you know nothing will change.

Sherry's brain will be uploaded onto the Virtuport servers. Her entire personality will be uploaded to the great human singularity in the clouds above. She's not the first of your friends to go. Won't be the last. You even plan to join her.

But ever since you unplugged for the required two months, things are changing. It had been months since you shared the warmth of a bed, or a picnic on a soft patch of grass in one of the underground parks, or even just taken in a bottle of wine by candlelight. There she was alive - living, breathing, and just as beautiful as the day you married her.

It was easy to forget that when you did your Real-Life Test together. There you were either in the Tanks for weeks at a time, or decompressing from weeks in the Tanks, or performing any number of tests the engineers require to map the brain in full.

She manages to hold up a weak smile when you rise up and leave the prep room. Then it's calm walking, hurried gait, a jog, and then you're bolting through the halls of

Virtuport, passing by saline sensory deprivation tanks, teeming throngs of weekend-warrior types in gloves and goggles, until you're finally in the lobby with the kiddies and the arcade games and, thankfully, daylight.

[→ daylight](#)

[← Back](#)

[Start over](#)

know you do, honey. And you will, just as soon as we can afford it. They give us the family discount once I've been in for three months; just hold on until then. I promise. It's going to be great.

“Being a computer will be pretty sweet.”

→ “Being a computer will be pretty sweet.”

← Back

Start over

“I’m not sure either. But at this point, why not? In for a penny and all that.”
“Maybe we should slow down, think a bit.”

→ “Maybe we should slow down, think a bit.”

← Back

Start over

You step out. It's hot today. Too hot, as always. There's a mirrored awning shielding you from the sun above. Below a mass of cars roar across eight lanes of highway. A few brave sunbathers lay under heavy gauze on the Virtuport's balcony. They will have melanoma by day's end.

The air reeks of sulfur and stale sweat. It is dry, and your lips chap up just thinking about walking away from the comfort of a climate-controlled building.

You're reminded, briefly, of why you bought a Virtuport membership in the first place. When the world's this fucked who can blame anybody for a little escapism?

I really should go back to her.

I could use a drink.

→ I really should go back to her.

→ I could use a drink.

← Back

Start over

F or a while you say nothing. She pads at her tablet for a while. Swipes through news stories, photos. Occasionally she looks up and studies your face Sit and appreciate the silence.
“You should take a picture. It would last longer.”

→ Sit and appreciate the silence.

→ “You should take a picture. It would last longer.”

← Back

Start over

“I would honey. But it’s hard. You know it just as well as I do. I keep losing track of what’s real.” SHe flicks her head to one side, giggling. “I keep trying to call up the menu and it won’t come!

“Besides, the real world just looks... bland.”

→ **bland**

← Back

Start over

“I’m sorry,” you say. She isn’t mad. Disappointed, sure. She can’t hide that. But not mad.

“The doctors said people go through stages of grief,” she says. “I’m just glad you’re still here and not at home freaking out.”

Then she grabs your hands in hers and squeezes tight and for a fleeting moment your brain panics.

This may be the last time you touch her, so you say the only thing you have left.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

→ “I’m not going anywhere.”

← Back

Start over

You duck into one of the mirrored walkways that span the highway below. The path is well-worn and your feet have long since memorized the contours between the virtuport and the neighborhood dive. Too many late night cravings in salinated tanks for you means you know the place to find cheap food and decent drinks. That, and the barkeep never looked at the addicts weird, their skin wrinkled leather, hands peeling in long, unbroken, water-logged sheets. You know this because you've been to this bar after long weeks in the tank. The guy just doesn't blink.

When your eyes meet the barkeep doesn't have to ask questions. He knows. Two tequila shots, doubles. He raises one to you. "You celebrating, or grieving?"

→ celebrating

→ grieving

← Back

Start over

She keeps staring at you and tapping notes on her tablet. It's nice here. Almost pastoral. You think of nothing for a while.

There is a knock at the door. You look to Sherry. Sherry to you. Then she shrugs and answers it.

→ answers it.

← Back

Start over

She waves you off. “No, no! I’m sorry. Don’t mean to be creepy. I’m just looking you over. Trying to... well...

“It’s silly.”

“Go on.”

→ “Go on.”

← Back

Start over

“B land!” she said again. “Like someone’s showing me a new sim on a CRT. God. Remember those? Big boat anchors that hummed so hard they gave you headaches. Expensive, too. I lugged the same one around for years while I learned C.

“Did you know if you opened one of those things there was a capacitor inside that could kill you? Serious. For years nearly every home had at least one big, boxy item on their desks that could kill them if they so much as touched it wrong. Crazy, right?”

You smile. She’s excited, which is better than angry, or depressed, or despondent. But it lasted for only a moment. Soon her eyes turned downward.

“They warned us about this. Living in a virtual world ruins you for the real thing.”

“I guess.”

→ “I guess.”

← Back

Start over

“Fuck yeah,” he says. You slam the drink.
“Thanks.”
“It’s on me, mac.”

You can’t bring yourself to say thank you.

→ You can’t bring yourself to say thank you.

← Back

Start over

“Pity, that.” He pours another for you. Both go down hot and hissing all the way.

“You know, I always tell unsure pilgrims to wait. What’s the big rush? Computer’ll be there when you’re old just as easy as when you’re young. Go out! See what’s left of the world! Fuck like rabbits! World’s a piece of shit, but that don’t mean there ain’t good here. Know what I mean?”

You nod.

“I mean that.” He takes the shot glasses from you, wipes them down, pours a beer for you. “It’s on me, mac. Lord knows you need it. You religious?”

Not terribly. But you lie. Easier than an argument.

“Fuck, man. Some folks say that’s the rapture, right there. Suck the believers right up into a computer sim. I mean... fuck, man! What’s the world coming to? Can’t go outside no more, can’t find a reason to stay alive. No wonder folks’re turning to Virtuport. Why the hell not, right?”

You chug the beer. Why the hell not?

→ Why the hell not?

← Back

Start over

The doctor is carrying calipers in his coat pocket and a computer in his free hand. “So, ready for takeoff?”

We’ve got the runway cleared off for you. Should be getting you scrubbed in real soon. Don’t worry; we’ll have you uploaded and good to go before you even realize we did any work.”

He looks to you. “You can scrub in too, if you like. I always give spouses the option.”

“I should be there for her. Scrub me in.”

“I’ll wait outside.

“I can’t.”

→ “I should be there for her. Scrub me in.”

→ “I’ll wait outside.

→ “I can’t.”

← Back

Start over

“S top it!”

“Please,” you say. “It’s our last night.”

She kicks at her chair and flips the tablet to face you. “It’s just... I’m trying to remember everything about this moment. The angle of your chin, the way you melt into your thoughts when you think I’m not looking, the touch of your fingers.”

“The smell of my aftershave?”

“Even that! Though it’s more about how you smell in the dead of the night, how I feel when you’re close. And... well, I’m not that good.”

She points to the tablet where she has written a small poem. It’s in her own handwriting.

→ poem

← Back

Start over

You return to the prep room some time later, too drunk and too late. She's already gone.

Fuck.

Wait in the waiting room.

Port in. Maybe she's already on the other side.

→ Wait in the waiting room.

→ Port in. Maybe she's already on the other side.

← Back

Start over

You promised you'd put this event on a live stream.
The doctor relents, but you have to cover her tablet
in a scrub cloth and poke a hole for the camera lens.

The nurse re-washes the spots you miss with greasy blue
antibacterial soap. It does not register. Instead your eyes are
trained on your wife laid out on a gurney like some pariah,
or maybe a saint among her followers. Bathed in the OR
light she shines like an angel.

She smiles. Even manages to wink your way once or twice.
You smile back while the nurse fusses with gloves. She
points to the tablet. Says "Thank you."

You commit the sound to memory. Angel bells.

She is shivering

→ She is shivering

← Back

Start over

You sit. The room is wide and empty. Above a 5 minute ad plays on repeat. It tells you about the joys of owning a personal tank. Full sensory deprivation. Full illusory feedback. “Just like you’re there,” they say. Over and over again.

You listen to the commercial ten times.

The doctor looks pleased when he comes out.

→ The doctor looks pleased when he comes out.

← Back

Start over

I want to remember midnight clear the blankets twisted
tight to your ankles, lavender in your pillow, musk in
your hair, (Sweat on your brow that smells of sweet
summer days)

Your face has no filter for walking talking daydreaming
even in sleep your lips line sadness and joy lust and longing
flowing like water — down — stream

When we were young and you had the cat that hated
everybody and I hated the cat that hated everybody and you
loved that I hated the cat that hated everybody you said your
cat was spoiled. She wasn't. She was just picky. And when
she came to my side and purred and you freaked out because
she was the cat that hated everybody I learned this.

She cuddles like you do: loose, carefree. As if nothing will
ever change.

I want to remember all of this.

I will remember all.

I must.

Kiss her.

"It's beautiful."

→ Kiss her.

→ “It’s beautiful.”

← Back

Start over

They have a tank on standby for you, as always. You rent the space for a monthly fee. Prep takes only a few minutes: strip down, add electrodes, attach skull cap, dive into tank, press power. From there the Virtuport software does the rest.

The bottom drops out of your world, inverts, and then you discover fresh-cut grass under your feet. This is new. It should not be like this.

You should be in your home.

It's all gone.

You try to dial her up and say you're sorry but the system stops you. Blocked.

You sit in the grass and stare up at clouds you know aren't real. It's better than going back outside.

[← Back](#)

[Start over](#)

Already they were packing her in a saline ice bath, her skin pale as the blood slowed. Protocol stated that patients must be awake for the procedure. Studies showed that an online brain had a 25% better survival rate opposed to a brain under anesthesia. Beside her a mandolin slicer buzzed to life. It is attached to a clamp, which is in turn fastened to a cage surrounding Sherry's skull.

Computers collapse onto her. You reach for her hand and squeeze. It is cold. She squeezes back.

The nurse inserts an IV line. Sherry's eyes glaze into a light twilight. Sedatives and painkillers. They warn you that she may giggle while her head is sliced into shreds.

The doctors paint her skull with iodine and draw guidelines that the scanning machine will soon follow. It is an imposing beast, wired into the wall by a hundred networking cables linked in sequence, complete a drip tray to catch any leavings that find their way down the cables.

The doctors place a plexiglass shield between you and her. The mandolin scores a few lines across the back of her neck.

"Are you ready?" they ask. You squeeze her hand.

"Yes."

The slicer works quickly.

→ The slicer works quickly.

← Back

Start over

The procedure ends quickly, and then the morgue team snips away her wristband. You are rushed away. Priests, rabbis, imams all wait at tables in the post-op recovery room. You speak to no one.

The doctors come eventually. They are all smiles. They call up maps, graphs, charts. All is well. By all meaningful measurements Sherry's brainwave patterns are unbroken, alive, and well. They even call up a window to the virtual world so you can see her settling in, smiling, dancing.

It does not help.

The doctors point to the clergy and shake your hand. This conversation is no longer within their job description.

Go Home

Port In and see Sherry

[→ Go Home](#)

[→ Port In and see Sherry.](#)

[← Back](#)

[Start over](#)

You kiss her. It's a love peck at first, but soon it develops gravity, pulls you tighter. The world goes dark, tunneled. The kiss explodes in colors, smells of lavender, sets fireworks in your ears.

Your tongues twist together, grasp for driftwood in a gaping, rolling sea that swirls around you both. To let go is death in a deep, dank underwater whorl, the taste of salt and fresh tears filling your lungs.

There is a knock at the prep room door. You pull her tighter to your chest and her body almost feels as if it could meld into yours. The two flesh become one and never feel the ache of loneliness again. You try this together like two children who refuse to believe their parents' insistence that fairies aren't real and run to the woods to catch them.

Stubborn optimism. Dreams.

The knock gets louder.

→ knock

← Back

Start over

The slicer screeches every time it hits bone. It stops after each pass so a scanner can dip into the cavity and take a picture. Then the network cables flicker and flash with data transport.

You close your eyes once life leaves her. Then your mind thrashes through memory. You try to remember the way her cheeks reddened with wine. The look on her face when your cat nuzzled her nose. The smile, the eyes, the way you fit together like jigsaw pieces. All this flows through nanoscopic neural pathways as electricity. A soul. A data storage solution, imperfect as it may be.

Sherry's soul drifts bright yellow through your mind.

Will she stay with you?

Will you forget her?

→ Will you forget her?

← Back

Start over

Your apartment is dark and quiet. You turn on the lights and discover just how much stuff you and Sherry shared: photos, knick-knacks, the kitchen set your parents bought for your wedding that turned out to be both practical and appreciated. Each artifact stabs at your heart and all you can think of is Sherry dead in a refrigerator somewhere.

You turn off the lights.

there's a notification waiting on your laptop. The notification is her. Not "her," exactly. But the copy of her. 70pb of a shell that once was her. "Use only in emergency," it says.

You put the file on a memory stick, then move it to a little urn you and Sherry picked out for just this purpose. There is a little shrine on the bookshelf waiting for just this thing. It seemed only appropriate.

Virtuport has a windowed client for laptops. You call up her address in that world and there she is, smiling, waving. "Hello gorgeous!" she chirps.

It sounds hollow coming from your laptop. There's no warmth, no resonance from the walls. You can't feel her voice buzzing when you're laying against her breast, or hug

her tight when words aren't enough. They're just electronic vibrations generated by a laptop speaker being fed instructions from a gorgeously complex simulation.

But it's Sherry, you tell yourself. It's the love of your life, and you will join her soon.

"Hello," you say back, and life tried its best to get back to normal.

[← Back](#)

[Start over](#)

They have a tank on standby for you, as always. You rent the space for a monthly fee. Prep takes only a few minutes: strip down, add electrodes, attach skull cap, dive into tank, press power. From there the Virtuport software does the rest.

The bottom drops out of your world, inverts, and then you are back in your real home. A sprawling crystal castle lays before you, a labor of love between you and your sweetheart. It took months to design all the model contours, program the materials physics, and generate that AI that populate your little piece of royalty. But, for better or worse, it was your house of dreams.

A footman offers you a robe and slippers. You take them. Outside the sun is shining warm against the windows, and rain forms a curtain off in the West.

Sherry is waiting for you in the bedroom. A thousand screens spread out around her. “I can do everything at once,” she says. Each screen has a cursor furiously typing perfect code. “It’s like someone is just pulling ideas from my head before I even know how to word them.”

“Is it as awesome as promised?”

She considers this for a moment. “I’m not sure. New world, new powers, new sense of opportunity. World’s limited only by imagination. But still...”

“It’s different.”

She laughs and scrapes her slipper against a screen, which dissipates into the air. “Yeah. Different. I keep thinking about that poem and wondering if I did enough.”

“Yeah.”

“If my memory will sustain me.”

“Me too.”

“But we’ll work it out,” she says, smiling. Then she pats the bed beside her. It responds with gentle, rolling waves.

You dive into the water and lock together once again.

[← Back](#)

[Start over](#)

The kiss dissolves into history. The feeling drains from your bones too quickly. You struggle to keep it close, to remember the curve of her hips, the way your arms and hers lock together like puzzle pieces. The sims can never quite get it right.

You open the door for the doctor.

→ **You open the door for the doctor.**

← Back

Start over



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