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## Little Billy Wells

or

### Living in this Life is like Running on a Hamster Wheel

The sun is shining brightly as I walk through the park, rays of sunlight filter through the canopy above my head, gently warming my skin. I duck and hide behind trees and bushes to avoid being seen by the Watch. Lord knows how much trouble I would get in if I were caught. I would probably be sent off to one of those Atwood Correction Centers. Just the thought of what goes on behind those grey walls sends shivers down my spine. I hurry on my way towards the center of the park, a branch scrapes against my face and blood runs down my cheek, but I keep moving. I'm already late.

I reach our hiding spot and she is there waiting for me. Our spot is under three large trees, surrounded on all sides by bushes so no one can see in. She is sitting on a red checkered blanket with a picnic basket at her side. I walk into the clearing.

"Sorry I'm late" I say.

She looks at me with her blue eyes and smiles. "You're here now, that's what matters. Did you have any trouble getting here?"

I sit down next to her on the blanket. "A little, there was a Watch patrol combing around the bridge. Are you sure we are safe here?"

She nods and says "completely."

I take a look around at our surroundings. It's quiet except for a few birds chirping in the trees. I hope she is right. She leans in close to me and rests her head on my shoulder. The breeze tosses her blonde hair around and the smell of her lilac shampoo fills my nose. I breathe it in. I lie on my back and she rests her head on my chest. Her head rises and falls with my breathing. She looks up at me with her blue eyes now and I begin to tremble. This is only our third meeting.

"I love you" I say

"I love you too"

I move in to kiss her and...

The viewing monitor clicks off and the man and the woman and the park are gone. The students look up at Dr. Ray Chandler, director of the Atwood Correction Center in New York City. "As you can see, prisoner 23006893 is completely unaware of his state of mediated presence," pointing at the electronic control board. "He fully believes he is in Central Park. He has the full use of his senses; he can feel every blade of grass, the bark on the trees and the cut on his cheek. He can smell, taste, hear and see everything around him. He has no idea of the virtual world he is in. The recreation is flawless, it is impossible for anyone to tell the difference between his world and the real world. We are quite proud of it" says Dr. Chandler with a smile.

The students look down at prisoner 23006893 again. He is incased in a glass chamber, lying on a black bed. Wires and electrodes crisscross all over his body from head to toe and dark goggles cover his eyes.

"Now of course you know that the Atwood Correction Centers are where society's most dangerous criminals are sent for rehabilitation and punishment. They are brought here so they can no longer do harm, spreading their filth and false ideas to the rest of the population." Mr.

Chandler had lost his smile now. “What you have seen here is the first of three stages, Re-Reality, as we call it. When a fugitive is first captured they are immediately taken here, where our neuro-processors create a virtual replica of their world using their memories and experiences. Then they are placed in a VRM III System”, tapping on the glass chamber. “They wake up in their new world and are none the wiser to the switch; however inside” Mr. Chandler’s smile crept back onto his face “we are gods.

“We have full control over their virtual world and we can bend and twist their reality for our, and societies, benefit. Allow me to explain. What you saw with prisoner 23006893 never occurred, in the real world. The Watch captured him thirty minutes before on his way into the park. But our engineers altered his new virtual reality so he we never captured. Then we were able to follow and observe him as he continued on his way, eventually exposing the woman.” Dr. Chandler gestures to the adjacent glass chamber. Inside was a beautiful blonde woman. “We didn’t know who she was, but once we followed prisoner 23006893 a little longer, he led us right to her. We often keep criminals in their virtual worlds for years, helping to expose other criminals or would be criminals. They...”

One of the students slowly raised his hand.

“Yes?” asks Dr. Chandler, annoyed by the interruption.

The little boy quickly lowered his hand and looked at his feet.

“Do you have something to say?” asks Dr. Chandler, staring at the boy. “What is it?”

The little boy hesitated, and then spoke, nervously. “Th..They’re living lies, f-f-for no reason.

Dr. Chandler leans in close. “What’s your name little boy?”

“Billy Wells, sir.”

“Well Billy, it’s not for no reason. We use their own neuro-makeup to help us hunt down and capture other dangerous criminals like themselves.” says Dr. Chandler, gesturing to the rest of the room. A long hallway lined on both sides with glass chambers. “It’s the perfect system. You wouldn’t want these bad people running around loose in the streets now would you Billy?”

“No, sir” mumbles Billy.

Dr. Chandler straightens up and leads the tour a little further down the hall. “You may recognize these VRM III Systems. They are upgraded versions of the ones you have at home. Of course you are in full control and no one is watching you” says Dr. Chandler with a chuckle. “Now, follow me for the rest of the tour. The next floor is Stage Two, Re-Learning.”

The group of students follow Dr. Chandler down the long corridor past row after row of glass chambers. Billy lingers behind looking in on prisoner 23006893.

“Hurry up, Billy” cries his friend Philip.

Billy looks at the glass chamber for a few more seconds then hurries to catch up with his classmates at the elevator.

On the next floor, Dr. Chandler stops in front of another glass chamber. The students huddle around him and look in. Inside a woman lies convulsing on the black table. Her wrists and ankles bolted down with heavy locks.

“On Stage Two we focus on rehabilitation. The prisoners are run through the same program, the offense they committed, over and over again. As they commit their offense they are administered an intense electrical shock. We try to install in their mind a sense of wrong in what they are doing. And of course if they fail, as many do, they are sent to Stage Three, Termination.

This one” says Dr. Chandler, pointing at the woman convulsing on the black bed, “was captured by the Watch for the production of prohibited materials.”

Dr. Chandler clicks on the viewing monitor. The students watch through the eyes of the woman as she runs a paintbrush over a canvas, a red streak through a field of blue, then lets out a scream of pain and her body falls to the floor. Dr. Chandler turns off the monitor and the eyes of the students fall on the woman in the glass chamber, her body still shaking.

“Foolish really” sighs Dr, Chandler. “Once they are corrupted they rarely ever learn again.”

As the rest of the students listened eagerly, Billy remained at the rear, deep in thought. Dr. Chandler’s words were running through his head. *They are upgraded versions of the ones you have at home.* Billy thought about this. He used his quite often, every kid did. Billy remembered the first time he ever tried out the VRM III System. Just days before the government had mandated that every home have one and required that each family member spend two hours in the glass chamber. The systems for home use were advertised as the Perfect Vacation. Commercials on the 24/7 Atwood Shopping Chanel read “Create your own virtual environment, for travel, leisure, play, anything you want, and all within the comfort and privacy of your own home.”

Billy remembers looking through the selection of preapproved programs from the Atwood News and Information Organization and choosing The Battle of White Hills, where General Atwood defeats the invading Russian forces.

He had stepped into the chamber, lied down on the bed and placed the goggles over his eyes. For an instant he was in total darkness, then in a brilliant flash of colors the blackness was gone and in its place was a sky of deep blue and tall green pine trees that stretched high above

his head. He was no longer fourteen year old Billy Wells; he was now a soldier for the Atwood Army. He was tall and strong, a whole new person. He remembers looking at his hands, his new hands, and feeling his new body, his first step as a different person. It felt so real. Then over his head a shell exploded and Billy ducked and covered his head. Now he realizes how silly that was; he was in no real harm.

Billy had gone on many adventures using the VRM III System. He climbed Mount Atwood, walked on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and flew through space; he even created his own worlds. But not being in control troubled him. What if he was being watched? Trapped in a fake world going nowhere, like a hamster on a wheel? How could he tell?

Dr. Chandler watches as the students file out through the large grey front doors, saluting the portrait of Overlord Atwood as they pass under his stern scowl and big brown eyebrows. At the end of the tour Dr. Chandler had told them “Now be good boys and girls, report any suspicious activity, take your emoti-kil pills twice a day and always use your VRM III Systems. You don’t want to end up here.” He said this with a smile on his face but his eyes were steel daggers.

Little Billy Wells was the last to leave and Dr. Chandler’s gaze follows his every step. To his secretary standing at his right, Dr. Chandler says “Tell the Watch to keep an eye on that boy.”

“Yes sir.”

A week later, late at night, Dr. Chandler stands in front of the glass chamber holding prisoner 23006893, recently moved to Stage Two. His body jumps and contorts as white hot electricity runs through him. Dr. Chandler clicks on the viewing monitor.

*I love you.*

*I love you too.*

The body shakes violently.

“Why do you keep going back? Don’t you realize the risk, the pain? What could be so important about this love that you are willing to put yourself through all this?” Dr. Chandler shakes his head and turns off the monitor.

At home Billy turns on the VRM III System and runs a new program. He lies on the black bed, strapping himself in and placing the goggles over his eyes, engulfing himself in shadows. When the colors explode he is hiding in a park with a beautiful blonde woman telling her *I love you*.