

Face to Face

"Jeeves?"

"Yes, Mr. Barker?" Ted Barker had long since given up trying to understand technology. He just accepted it. Still, it was eerie the way Jeeves's voice always sounded like he was standing in the same room, just in front of Ted. As far as Ted knew there were no speakers in his house. No microphones. Nothing that he associated with technology. But Jeeves was always available. In any room. At any time.

"I'd like to visit Lucas today," Ted announced.

"I just checked his availability, and I regret to inform you that Mr. Springfield died two months ago," Jeeves replied.

"Oh." Ted was stunned. Lucas had been his childhood friend. They didn't talk regularly, but they visited a few times a year, just to keep in touch. "I didn't even know he was sick," he said after a pause.

"Mr. Springfield had an aneurysm." Jeeves explained. "When it burst, he died almost instantaneously. There was no pain. He was 93 years old."

Ted sat in silence, thinking about Lucas.

"Would you like me to create a virtual Mr. Springfield so you could still visit him?" Jeeves asked.

"No," Ted replied. "Thank you for offering, but it wouldn't be the same." He thought about Lucas some more. Then he added, "I should probably tell Jack. He knew Lucas, too."

"Mr. Crandall has nothing on his schedule today," Jeeves said almost immediately. "Would you like me to set up an encounter?"

Ted never ceased to be amazed at how quickly Jeeves could check schedules, news, history, or anything else he asked of him. "No thank you," he replied. "I really need to tell him this face to face."

"You would be seeing him face to face in a virtual encounter," Jeeves suggested.

"Yes, but it's not the same. I need to be there in the same room with him. Where I could reach out and touch him."

"You could touch him in a virtual encounter . . . if that's what you want to do."

Ted smiled. "I know, Jeeves. But it's still not the same. It's a human thing. I need to physically go to his apartment and be in the same room with him when I tell him about Lucas."

"Shall I call a cab?" Jeeves asked.

Ted started to say yes, but then he reconsidered. “No, I think I’ll walk. It’s only a few blocks, and I haven’t gone for a walk in ages.”

“You walk every day on your treadmill,” Jeeves reminded him. “It keeps you healthy.”

“Those are virtual walks,” Ted replied. “Physically I’m walking on the treadmill, but I feel like I’m walking in the mountains. Or on the seashore. Or on the strip in Las Vegas. The sights, the sounds, the smells – they’re all wonderful. But it’s not quite the same as taking a walk in the real world. Ask Jack if it’s OK if I come over now. Tell him it will take me about twenty minutes to get there.”

Ted enjoyed walking through the city. It was a warm, sunny morning and everything looked clean and bright. He was old enough to remember when politicians were still running the city. It was dirty and run down then, with cracks in the sidewalk, garbage in the alleyways, and crowds of people avoiding eye contact with panhandlers on the corners. Now everything looked new. The sidewalks were perfect, there was no trash anywhere, and the parks were perfectly manicured. There were no crowds, though. It had been quite a while since he’d last taken a walk, but he remembered seeing a few other people then. Now the sidewalks were empty. The parks were empty, too. The streets were humming with delivery vehicles – sleek, driverless vans that made a swishing noise as they rushed by on their appointed rounds – but he saw no passenger vehicles. Didn’t anyone go outdoors anymore?

When he got to Jack’s apartment Jack was delighted to see him. He seemed especially happy to meet him face to face. He gave Ted a cup of coffee, they sat down in Jack’s living room, and Ted told him about the death of Lucas. For a while they talked about how sad they were about his death, and then they started reminiscing about the things they’d done with Lucas as kids.

“Remember when his dad brought scrap lumber home from the factory where he worked?” Jack asked. “His dad was going to build a garden shed out of it, but we swiped so much wood to build a treehouse that there wasn’t enough left for the shed. Boy was his dad mad! That was before the Transition, of course.”

“Yeah,” Ted said. “I remember. That was about the time my dad lost his job. Mom and Dad were really worried about how they were going to be able to buy food and pay rent.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “It happened to my dad, too. And my mom. She was a schoolteacher. But I guess it was inevitable. As machines got smarter, they could do anything faster and better than a human.”

“And cheaper,” Ted added. “That was something we didn’t see coming. When machines started growing food, the price of groceries came down. When they started designing and building cars, the quality went up and the price came down. Pretty soon the only thing we were paying for was the cost of raw materials and the cost of the energy to run the machines.”

“And we were only paying that because the people who owned the mines, the factories, and the power plants charged us. They weren’t doing anything to earn it. Machines were doing all the work and all the planning. So, the government turned everything over to the machines, and we started getting everything for free.”

“And yet, the politicians were surprised when people began asking ‘What are you doing that couldn’t be done better by a machine?’ The voters forced the politicians to turn the government over to machines, and suddenly everything started running smoothly. No wars, no poverty, no annoying campaigns – just good government.”

“You notice they only started calling it ‘the Transition’ when the politicians lost *their* jobs to machines.” Jack said. “They were the ones who decided when everyone else’s job should ‘transition’ to a machine, but it only became ‘*the* Transition’ when they were replaced.” They both laughed as they reminisced about how surprised the politicians were when they realized they were no longer needed.

“Of course,” Jack added, “just because everything was free didn’t mean you could have anything you wanted.”

“You could if you waited long enough,” Ted countered. “Assuming you lived that long. I remember when my dad decided to take the whole family on a skiing trip to Aspen. They were booked seventeen years out because so many other people wanted to take a free trip to Aspen.”

“My dad tried to get a new car,” Jack said. “There was a ten year wait for cars. Then someone invented the virtual experience helmet. You didn’t need a new car. You could put on a helmet and experience a new car in your living room. The sight, the sound, the smell of the new interior, the acceleration as you stepped on the gas . . . everything.”

“More likely some *thing* invented it,” Ted said. “I don’t think humans were inventing anything by the time those helmets came out. But they revolutionized everything. I know what you mean about virtual cars. I drove a virtual Ferrari around Le Mans once. Scariest thing I ever did! But my dad did get to take us skiing in Aspen. The whole family. And he arranged to meet his brother and his family there. It was a virtual trip, of course, but we could see and interact with everyone. When we went skiing, we were the only ones on the slopes. When we walked into the restaurant at the ski lodge, it was full of people having a good time. I don’t know if they were virtual people or real people taking a virtual vacation the same time we were. You couldn’t tell, and it didn’t matter. It was just a great trip.”

The conversation lagged, and Ted switched to a new subject. He told Jack how strange it seemed that he hadn’t seen any other people during his walk.

“They were probably all inside, enjoying virtual trips someplace,” Jack said. “I haven’t been outside for several weeks myself. Maybe several months.”

“Yes, but there weren’t even any kids in the playground,” Ted said. “You’d think there would be at least a few kids playing outside.”

"They probably have virtual playgrounds," Jack suggested.

"I don't see how it could be the same," Ted lamented. "How can you virtually slide into third base? But I wouldn't know. Evelyn and I were so busy taking trips and living our own lives that we never had kids." He paused, and then added "I really miss her."

"I miss Lily, too," Jack said. "We never had kids either, for the same reason."

"Sometimes I wish we'd had kids," Ted mused, "but we had a great life together so I shouldn't complain. Plus, Evelyn was afraid of getting pregnant, and especially of complications. When life seems perfect, you don't want to take unnecessary chances."

"Lily felt the same way. They'd pretty much cured all diseases by then. If you didn't take risks, you'd live until your body wore out. Lily always said 'why roll the dice?'"

"Somebody's got to be rolling the dice," Ted said. "You don't change human nature overnight."

"Maybe it wasn't human nature that changed," Jack answered. "I had a friend, once. A few years older than us. He and his wife had a baby boy before the Transition. After the machines took over my friends decided to have another, but she couldn't get pregnant. My friend claimed the machines were putting something in the water to prevent it, but he was sort of a conspiracy nut anyway."

"Sounds pretty far-fetched to me," Ted said.

"Me too," Jack agreed. "But he also said his son began having virtual sex when he was in high school. His son didn't tell him about it until years later, of course, but he said he had virtual sex with girls he knew and with virtual partners. They considered it the ultimate safe sex experience."

"Virtual sex? Boy, I wish they'd had that when I was in high school!"

"Me too. But the point is, his son never married. Never even had a steady girlfriend. He had lots of friends that he met in virtual space. Some were real, some were virtual. His son said he forgot which were which. He didn't see the point to getting married. He could have virtual sex any time he wanted. With movie stars even. Didn't matter to him that they weren't real. And he certainly didn't see the need to have kids. What if all the young people today are like that? Maybe human nature *is* changing."

Ted thought about that for a while. "Boy I hope that's not the case," he said. "But now that you mention it, I don't remember seeing any kids for a long time. Of course, I almost never leave my apartment. And the only people I meet in virtual space are geezers like us. They never talk about their children or grandchildren, though."

"Same here," Jack said. "I can't even remember when the last time was that I met with anyone young enough to have kids. But when the machines took over, didn't they promise to take care of us? I thought the scientist said they were programmed to never hurt a human."

“I think you’re right. But taking care of us doesn’t mean they’ll make certain we have kids. That just means they’ll take care of everyone who’s already here.”

“We may be facing extinction,” Jack warned.

“We may already *be* extinct,” Ted said. “If there’s no one left who’s young enough to have children, the human race is finished. We just don’t know it yet.” For a moment he thought about asking Jeeves how many young people there were in the world. He was pretty sure Jeeves would know, but for the first time, he wondered if Jeeves would tell him the truth. Then he decided not to ask. It wasn’t because he didn’t trust Jeeves to tell the truth. It was because he didn’t want to know the answer.