

ACTIVATED

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Based on the short story C. Elegans
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SELECT SCENE #1: INTRODUCTION TO NELL

EXT. STREET. SEATTLE, WASHINGTON - NIGHT

Three FIRE TRUCKS and two AMBULANCES idle on the street. Lights flash in a perpetual loop.

Several PEOPLE stand on the sidewalk looking up.

A small apartment building is ablaze. The fire is wild; FIREFIGHTERS attack the blaze with several fire hoses.

A badly BURNED MAN is quickly wheeled away on a gurney.

COMMOTION OFF SCREEN.

Suddenly, two MEDICS wheel NELL (late 20s) -- wild and confused -- towards a second ambulance.

NELL

(dazed)

I can't disconnect! I can't
disconnect!

A jumble of almost indistinguishable nonsense comes from her.

The first ambulance speeds off into the night, taking a sharp turn at the end of the block.

One of the MEDICS steps up into the second ambulance. Nell is then lifted up into it.

The SECOND MEDIC slams the door, and the ambulance pulls away from the curb.

The firefighters continue battling the fire, as RESIDENTS watch their lives burn to the ground.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Chaotic hospital. The STAFF rushes around.

CLOSE ON Nell. Her behavior is less erratic than before. Her face is covered in a thin layer of smoke residue.

Her eyes lock onto some curtains that swing wildly with the movement around her.

NELL

(dazed)

The curtains.

Typical hospital pattern. Blue and pink indiscriminate designs. The patterns begin to dance and meld together, creating new shapes.

Nell's eyes narrow as the patterns change in front of her; like she's tripping.

NURSE (O.S.)
Do you know where you are?

NELL
I'm lost.

NURSE
You're in the emergency room of Kindred Hospital.

NELL
It smells like burnt toast...

NURSE
What's your name?

NELL
En02.

The NURSE looks past Nell to someone on the other side of her hospital bed.

NURSE (O.S.)
Not your username. What's the name on your birth certificate?

Nell's eyes shift to the left.

NELL
(laughs)
I don't even know anymore.
(serious change in tone)
I'm not in the mood for dick wagging, dude. Take it to some other Sim.

The nurses look at one another, coming to the same conclusion: this woman is in her own world.

NELL (CONT'D)
I need a break.

Nell reaches up as if grasping for a Virtual Reality Headset, only to clasp at nothing.

Fear strikes her face.

NELL (CONT'D)
(whisper)
Wait!

She begins to move wildly again, struggling to get out off the gurney.

MALE NURSE
We'll get her information later.

One nurse holds her arms down tightly.

NURSE
(to Nell)
We need to restrain you.

NELL
I want out! End it. End it!

The other nurse pushes on the end of a needle with a gloved hand. A sedative shoots into the air, relieving the shot of any bubbles.

The nurse presses the needle into Nell's arm, who looks down in a panic, before slipping it out from underneath Nell's skin.

Nell's squirming body begins to ease. Finally, she quietens and lays still.

Her eyes close as she nods off.

INT. HOSPITAL - LATER

Nell forces her eyes open, fighting against the sedative.

The curtains have calmed down around her; they no longer change shape.

The nurses have left her side.

Nell's brother WYATT (late 30s) speaks with an ADMINISTRATOR. His face is stern; concern hanging heavy around his mouth.

Off to the side is a POLICE OFFICER.

Wyatt looks over in her direction.

Nell looks down at her arm. A piece of gauze has been hastily taped into the crook of her arm.

She begins to dip from consciousness once more.

INT. WYATT'S HOUSE. BASEMENT - NIGHT

Several months later.

Nell wakes with a start. She looks less disheveled than she did in the hospital.

Calmer, but still with bags beneath her eyes.

A cavernous basement surrounds her. Light coming from the washer/dryer illuminates the space.

Nell lays on an inflatable mattress. She holds out her arm and checks for a needle imprint. No imprint. No bandage.

She extends her fingers, holds her arm up, and very gently runs her fingers over her arm.

Nell closes her eyes, pretending she isn't the cause of this touch. It doesn't work.

INT. WYATT'S HOUSE. BASEMENT - CONTINUOUS

Nell climbs up the basement stairs leading out into a hallway. All is still.

INT. WYATT'S HOUSE. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nell moves through the quiet house is like a ghost town.

Modern furniture, very minimalist.

Lots of tiny lights from digital devices shine out at her from various points around the room.

She moves to a sliding glass door leading out to a back patio. She notes a small device centered on the wall parallel to the door.

She hesitates before crossing.

EXT. WYATT'S HOUSE. PATIO - CONTINUOUS

Nell sits on fake grass covering a small backyard and looks up at the sky. It's crystal clear. Unlike anything we know today.

No planes shoot across, just stars shining brilliantly.

She holds her hands out as if holding controllers, and clicks her fingers together, closing her eyes.

The motion soothes her.

SELECT SCENE #2: VIRTUAL REALITY ANONYMOUS MEETING

EXT. STREET. SEATTLE, WASHINGTON - DAY

Jia walks down the street. An unfamiliar part of Seattle.

INT. MUSEUM - DAY

Jia walks into an almost entirely empty lobby.

A COUPLE look around, museum pamphlets held in their hands.

INT. GALLERY. SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

The VRA LEADER sets chairs up the last chair in a circular fashion.

They look up at Jia as she walks in. A smile on their face, they're courteous and kind.

JIA
Is this VRA?

VRA LEADER
It is. Hello, hello. Nice to meet you.

Jia gingerly steps forward.

JIA
Can I just listen, or, I don't know if I'm ready to--

VRA LEADER
Of course. You speak only if and when you're ready.

The VRA Leader flips through their papers for a copy of the VRA manifesto.

JIA
Ironic that we're set up in a room in which people now use VR to view the art.

VRA LEADER
 (chuckles)
 At least it's being used for
 something.

The VRA Leader holds out the manifesto for Jia.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)
 This is a long process and you're
 doing a great job in taking your
 first step. *That's commendable.*

Jia takes the paper, finds the most inconspicuous chair in
 the room and takes a seat.

Slowly the room begins to fill, as more and more VRA MEMBERS
 arrive. They all seem to have their preferred seats; ignoring
 the other members in the room.

Jia looks down at the paper in her hands. It reads: VIRTUAL
 REALITY ANONYMOUS.

Below is their stated purpose and goal: to return to people
 their reality and prove their self worth outside the virtual
 world.

Jia's eyes narrow. This is not the world she created.

Across the room from Jia sits Nell; at this point she is
 unknown to Jia.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)
 Alright.

The VRA Leader closes their eyes; some around the room follow
 suit.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)
 I would like to begin today's VRA
 meeting with our serenity prayer.

Slowly, other people join in -- muttering along with the
 words they know so well.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)
 God grant me the serenity to
 accept the things I cannot
 change; courage to change the
 things I can --

GROUP
 God grant me the serenity to
 accept the things I cannot
 change; courage to change the
 things I can --

Jia looks around the room; not saying any of the prayer. She
 stares as if figuring each person out.

Finally, Jia's eyes settle on Nell. Nell looks back at her; challenging her.

Having been caught, Jia closes both eyes, and begins muttering along with the rest of the group.

VRA LEADER

Thank you.

Everyone settles into their seats; nervous hands running over jeans.

Jia watches all of them.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)

I hope everyone's week went well and that we were all able to continue with the progress we've made thus far. Some of us are just starting our journey and some of us are further along, but each step is a chance for you to overcome the past; the memories and the experiences that dog you.

(beat)

With work, you will all heal.

The members sit in silence.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)

With that said. Would anyone like to share any experiences from this past week? Interactions with other humans?

The VRA Leader looks around the room. People shift their feet, avoid eye contact.

Jia finally sees the various types of people who use her product and what their lives are like.

STEPH (30s), in a dirty shirt and run-in sneakers, raises her hand.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)

Wonderful. Thank you, Steph.

Steph takes a long, deep breath, inflating the top half of her body, and exhales with a grunt.

STEPH

This week I, uh, took the bus over to the park, down by the water. Gas Works, you know.

Steph avoids looking at anyone in the room. She speaks to the floor in front of her.

STEPH (CONT'D)

No music, no earbuds, no headset.
Nothing. There just wasn't --

Steph pauses trying to squeeze the words out.

STEPH (CONT'D)

Enough happening, you know? Like,
the park was alright. But... so
what?

(beat)

Anyway, that was my week.

VRA LEADER

Thank you for sharing. Would anyone
like to provide support to Steph on
her experiences this week?

Jia tentatively raises her hand.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)

Yes?

JIA

(to Steph)

Was there anything about the park
that was almost a relief you
couldn't control it?

The group looks at Steph. She concentrates hard, trying to bring up something positive.

STEPH

The wind. It was windy by the
water. It was annoying at first. I
hated it. My hair kept moving;
getting in my face. Then I realized
I felt something on my skin. I
hadn't felt much on my skin in... I
don't know...

Steph shrugs the sentence away.

VRA LEADER

(with a smile)

Let's keep sharing.

CUT TO:

INT. GALLERY. SEATTLE ART MUSEUM - CONTINUOUS

Another member, MIKE (40s), is revealing his story to the group.

MIKE

I fucked her, my hand pushed her face into the mattress. I could feel her mouth move under my hand, I guess to scream or something, but I didn't move it. I didn't think I had to, you know? The template I bought's really basic -- Room, Bed. That's what her's was so I thought... it just looked the same. I thought I was still in it.

Jia's closes her eyes, her brain unable to keep itself from imagining the scene.

CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

QUICK CUTS.

CLOSE UP.

FANTASY TEXTURE TO THE SCENE.

A MAN walks across the hall in his apartment building.

His hand bangs aggressively on the door.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

CLOSE UP.

FANTASY TEXTURE BEGINS TO MORPH INTO REALITY.

Two people have aggressive sex, while making unrealistic, porn-like noises.

CUT TO:

INT. GALLERY. SEATTLE ART MUSEUM - CONTINUOUS

Jia opens her eyes.

MIKE

I didn't let up until her boyfriend
came home. He threw me off her,
that's when I realized what'd
happened.

(beat)

I didn't know it was real.

All of the VRA members nod along. No matter the differences
in their stories, they've all been exactly where he is.

Suddenly, a shift in Mike's tone.

MIKE (CONT'D)

(to Jia)

I know that look, New Face.

Mike's aggression has switched on again.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Who the fuck are you to judge me?

Jia's scared by the sudden change in tone.

JIA

I wasn't...

Mike leans forward his anger pulsing through him, driving his
blood pressure up.

MIKE

What shit have you done?

VRA LEADER

Mike.

Mike pauses, staring daggers at Jia.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)

Does anyone have anything they'd
like to add to that?

Jia turns her face away from the room towards the artwork,
trying to hide any signs of fear.

LATER --

PETE (teenager) - young, scrawny with pubescent facial hair,
chews on the inside of his cheek.

His jaw is clenched. There's a feeling of aggressive, pent up
energy about him.

PETE

I mean not like that. I didn't. I couldn't. You know? But I would spend hours with my set on. I'd be in it just practicing over and over again.

Pete looks around.

PETE (CONT'D)

I'd aim at a target and fire. The fat butt of the gun vibrating near my armpit. It feels amazing. I'd rack up points. After a couple of months I became one of the best shots in the forum. There was this kind of excitement and anger at the same time. I fucking hated myself. Everything about me was shit. We'd push each other, and take it to different games and locations. Go on rampages together, shit like that. We were friends, I guess. They understood me; made me see who I really am. A piece of shit.

Pete looks around. Many members avert their eyes, some look directly at him, faces cold.

PETE (CONT'D)

One of the guys in the group, he bought a VR template you could adjust yourself. We created this... I don't know... scene, I guess. One of the guys designed the game so that women were on the streets or in stores. There are stock Stacy's you can purchase for scenes. We would just --

Pete releases a sadistic smile and makes a gun motion with his hand.

PETE (CONT'D)

You guys wouldn't get it. Some of you are Chads and Stacey's anyway.

Pete shrugs.

The VRA Leader takes a moment, unable to provide any words to soothe Pete, or the other's in the room who are equally disturbed.

VRA LEADER
Would anyone else like to share
today?

The VRA Leader notices Nell staring at Jia.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)
Nell. We haven't heard from you in
the last two months.

Nell shifts her gaze to the VRA Leader.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)
We're not here to judge. Sometimes
it helps to talk.

Nell leans forward in her chair; discomfort rising with every
centimeter moved.

NELL
Do you guys remember what guilt
feels like?

Nell doesn't look around or address anyone in particular.

NELL (CONT'D)
That was probably one of the
feelings I felt best without. It's
back now. And shame. There's shame
mixed in.

Jia watches Nell.

NELL (CONT'D)
This smell of burnt toast is always
around me. I wake up to it. It's
like my brain is trying to
constantly remind me of the
building. Of the fire. All of that.
What I did --

Jia suddenly realizes who this woman is.

NELL (CONT'D)
But didn't do, also. Like, it
wasn't me who did it. It was --

Nell gets frustrated and drops this line of thinking.

NELL (CONT'D)
I'm staying with my brother,
which... I mean, is fine, I guess.
But it's getting old now, you know?
(MORE)

NELL(CONT'D)

I shouldn't still be at his
anymore.

(beat)

Sometimes I feel like half a
person. Going offline -- I lost a
lot, my memories, my friends, my
social life.

(beat)

I'm... With the exception of
this... you guys... once a week...
I'm lonely. Even when I'm home.

VRA LEADER

Do you feel isolated?

Nell throws off the question, building her wall back up
again.

NELL

What's the difference?

VRA LEADER

We can be lonely and not isolated
and isolated but not lonely.
Isolation gives way to fear,
helplessness, sadness, and anger.

NELL

I lost the only connections I had,
my ones with friends--

VRA LEADER

--online.

NELL

Yeah, but, they were still real.
They were still people who knew me.

VRA LEADER

Do you think it's possible to make
connections again -- out here?

Nell finds this question as impossibly frustrating.

VRA LEADER (CONT'D)

There are people out here -- IRL,
as you say -- who want the same
thing.

NELL

It's not that easy returning to
reality.

(beat)

(MORE)

NELL (CONT'D)

All these feelings I haven't had to worry about in years. Guilt, embarrassment, shame, humiliation. They're all consuming. I can't prove it was VR induced. Most lawsuits against VR companies are tossed out, all I've got is a temporary insanity plea. It gets into your head -- the virtual world.

Another member interjects.

MEMBER

Shit's designed that way. They know what gets you and they hook you. They're abusers.

Jia winces.

A verbal agreement from several members.

VRA LEADER

Let's not interrupt --

MEMBER

What! It's purposely addictive. They say it's worse than fucking cigarettes --

All of the VRA members nod along, deep in thought. No matter the differences in their stories, they've all been exactly where Nell is.

VRA LEADER

I think we've all felt its power over us. This space is not about condemnation or blame.

WILLOW (20s) a privileged young adult who tries to hide it, speaks up --

WILLOW

Yeah, just to add to that, you know, we go to VRA, some of us serve time, community service shit like that. We get clean. We prove to our family that we're okay. But what they don't get is that we're alone, you know?

(MORE)

WILLOW (CONT'D)

You no longer have online people in your life, which some people say is good. But then you don't really have anyone.

CUT TO:

INT. GALLERY. SEATTLE ART MUSEUM - LATER

The end of the meeting. Members filter out. Jia picks up her bag, stuffs the VRA manifesto inside and looks up.

Nell silently folds chairs and brings them over to a stack on a dolly.

Jia makes her move , almost certain of who Nell is. She walks over to the table set up with bagels, donuts, and boxes of coffee.

She helps clean up, giving her a reason to stick around longer.

She picks up several used cups and discards them in a large trash bin at the end of the table.

Nell watches her, alert; wary of someone new.

They move about in silence, each one dancing around unspoken customs at a meeting for addiction.

JIA

I thought it was always a joke in movies. The donuts and coffee.

Nell is unsure of how to respond to a stranger making conversation IRL.

JIA (CONT'D)

I didn't think about how it'd feel hearing people's stories -- experiences.

The last remaining members exit the gallery.

JIA (CONT'D)

It's sobering.

Nell collects the last of the sticky plastic knives and forks.

NELL

That's why they call it sobriety.

Jia exhales a laugh. Nell looks over, an awkward smile. Interactions are difficult.

Jia dusts off her hands into the garbage bin.

JIA

I appreciate the things you said.

(beat)

I'm sorry you lost friends. That must be painful.

NELL

Some more so than others --

Nell tosses a used cup into the trash bin next to Jia, startling her.

JIA

You're right about loneliness. You're abandoned by the people closest to you -- family, whoever; even though, in many respects they--
(quickly corrects herself)
You deserve it. The fucking time wasted, the hours lost... someone finds you in the dark, just sitting there blankly.

Jia has a very specific memory in mind.

JIA (CONT'D)

(beat)

It makes me angry.

Jia corrects herself to reflect the identity she's fabricated.

NELL

It's beyond your control...

JIA

(shoots back)

But we all have agency. We decide how to act in situations.

Nell feels Jia fighting, she hurts for her.

JIA (CONT'D)

I didn't mean to imply...

Jia looks up at Nell; making direct eye-contact.

Jia's gaze holds Nell's eyes for a moment, before shifting away; releasing her.

Nell exhales the feeling that someone had momentarily held her soul.

Jia sweeps the palm of her hand across the crumb-free table.

JIA (CONT'D)

I'm sure when they designed this,
they imagined games and better
communication. Stronger
relationships.

NELL

Log on. Sit there consuming until
the colors around you become muted.
Until the only thing that gets you
going in the morning is knowing a
better version of you is waiting,
hanging on a wifi connection.
Everything you want, and every
fantasy played out. Build your own
scenarios, communicate with others,
see the world without leaving your
chair.

(beat)

They move fast and break things.
All the while, they leave minds
fractured by the wayside. Immobile
and alone.

Jia's eyes return to Nell's. They're glossy.

JIA

C. elegans.

Jia releases a pitiful smile.

JIA (CONT'D)

I'm Jia.

NELL

Nell.

Jia looks to the table, which is now completely cleared.

She steps forward, closer than people get these days.

She hesitates before gently grabbing Nell's forearm down near
the wrist. She gives the skin a caring, friendly squeeze.

Nell's body freezes. Touch is something so unexpected, almost
inconceivable, it startles her.

It sends chills up her entire being, felt at the base of each
individual hair.

Her body buzzes.

JIA
See you next week.

Jia's hand slips back around Nell's wrist again, and slides into her own pocket.

Nell watches as Jia leaves the room; she's frozen in place; numb