

The Sleeper Threshold

The cavernous waiting room had an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, with a spectacular view of the city spread out below, but Beth had barely glanced at it. Her eyes were fixed on one of the office doors, made of polished black glass with raised silver lettering:

JOSH WHITE
SLEEP ADVISOR

The rest of the room was slickly modern, down to the receptionist at an elegant desk in the corner, his face half-hidden behind a holographic computer screen. When they arrived, he had directed Beth and her husband, Stepan, to some uncomfortable chairs around a coffee table spread with brochures, but had not said a word since. Occasionally, Stepan would point something out in a brochure and try to make conversation, but the stillness of the place was oppressive, and he would soon lapse into silence.

She jumped slightly when the door clicked open, revealing a young couple. They glanced at Beth before walking across the echoing marble to the exit, whispering to each other in voices too low for her to make out, though she strained to hear. A second later, there was a soft 'ding'. The receptionist dismissed his screen with a swipe and looked toward them.

"Mr. White will see you now."

The office seemed a continuation of the waiting room: empty, save for some abstract art on the wall and a slender, dark wood desk with three chairs around it, one of them occupied by Josh White. He rose with a smile to greet them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Petersen, welcome. Please, have a seat."

He was a slightly short man, with an immaculate haircut and a physical fitness that was accentuated by his tight suit. He wore fashionable, thick-rimmed glasses with red frames, but still seemed to lean forward and squint slightly when he talked.

"As I explained on the phone, your account has reached what we like to call the 'Sleeper Threshold'. With the 6% interest offered on our long-term savings accounts, you would see significant growth during deep sleep, while covering the cost of your care."

"Uhm, yes," Stepan glanced over to Beth, "I was hoping you could explain the process fully," he coughed, "how safe it is."

"Yes, of course." Josh smiled warmly at Beth before running his fingers across the desk and turning his chair to face the wall. A projection appeared there, of a person reclined on what looked like an expensive dentist's chair. "During the sleep, your body will be kept at a low metabolic rate, similar to what NASA is doing for the Titan mission. You'll age at roughly 5% of your normal rate."

Beth leaned forward to consider the projection. It was surrounded by numbers and graphs; she recognised one as a heart-rate readout but the rest were unfamiliar, and seemed intentionally arcane to her.

“And I’ll be in some sort of simulation?” She said at length, in a small and hoarse voice.

“Exactly.” Josh gave another winning smile, “we find that the mind requires stimulus over this period, so we provide it with a simulation. Each couch is equipped with an array of the latest quantum processors, more than enough for this purpose.”

“To simulate the whole world?”

He chuckled softly, “No, no. The system focuses on providing you with the appropriate inputs; a maximum human sensory bandwidth could be taken as a hundred megabits per second, which it provides in detail. Everything you aren’t touching, seeing, hearing or smelling is dealt with in a much more approximate way,” He stood and walked toward the wall, apparently considering the projection there, before turning back to them, “but, as far as you will see, it will be real. You can continue your life out here exactly as it is now, with your partner.”

“So, we’ll be in the simulation together.” Stepan added, helpfully.

“Exactly,” this time the beaming smile was directed at him, “quantum entanglement allows for instantaneous transmission of information between the couches, though we limit it to four as the processing of their actions can introduce latency into the system.”

“Latency?”

“Delays between actions and responses. But this is well within safe limits for less than four people.”

Something clutched at Beth’s heart. “What do you mean by safe limits?”

“The mind has a delay of half a second between the senses receiving a stimulus and the mind processing the sensation, or a tenth of a second for reflexive responses. This provides us with a buffer.”

“No, what did you mean by ‘safe’? What happens if these limits are exceeded?”

Josh’s smile faltered for the first time, “the mind will tend to reject the simulation if it is recognised to be false, which can result in sudden awakening.”

“Sudden awakening? What happens then?”

“Uh...” He cleared his throat, “there were some cases of minor psychosis...” After a moment, his smile returned. “But that hasn’t happened in decades, since this technology was in its infancy. The world in there has been developed to be indistinguishable from real life.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t–” she pushed herself to her feet, “this just seems too unnatural.” Stepan looked up at her pleadingly, then stood too.

“Look, I know that it’s a lot to think about, but consider it this way: you two can spend the next sixty years of your life working, or you can skip ahead and have all that cash while you’re still young enough to enjoy it.” He walked over and shook their hands, “Go home and discuss it. I’ll send you some materials that explain it more fully.”

Beth stopped at the door and looked back.

“Mr. White?” He met her eyes. “You said that the simulation was indistinguishable from real life?”

“To a human, yes. Otherwise there would be a risk of-”

“So what if you’re in it right now?”

He paused, then grinned, “then I’m going to wake up rich.”

After they left, Josh White did not summon his next client immediately; instead, he sat and stared at the projection, frowning.