Final Christmas at UVicLand

There were tears at breakfast but as I slam shut the helicopter door I can see that the faces of my crew reflect none of the sorrow that they professed eight hours before. I sigh inwardly and force a grin onto my impossibly old face – I heard two of them whispering while waiting for their waffles to cook that they didn’t know how someone so old still worked – and give them a little finger wave before crouching over and trotting across the damp grass of the quad to stand under the trees waving gently in the late afternoon breeze. I watch the helicopter until it is just a dot heading over Mount Tolmie and release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. It is drizzling and I realize for the first time in months I can hear birdsong now that all the guests and workers are gone.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye – it is one of the resident deer, a doe named Molly according to the holo hovering over her head which she dips down to nibble delicately at the grass. The guests love the deer and we certainly don’t share with them that we have actually genetically engineered the native black-tailed species to be infertile over the entire range of what used to be Victoria. Usually around this time of year we’d be rounding up a few of the females and implanting them with embryos so that guests could ooh and aah over fawns in the spring. But not this year.

Molly continues to graze – it’s so quiet that I can hear her teeth grinding together and her snorting breath as she exhales. Management has given me a week to shut the place down and make my decision about what's next for me. Some would say that's generous but I've been here almost forever with only a few short stints away – nothing longer than a month – the thought of all I have to do has me rushing past Molly to my office which is – kind of ironically – located in the same area as the computer help desk used to be 150 years ago.

Not many of the guests ever enter the Clearihue building – old computer labs aren’t much to look at – as opposed to the exhibits that involve real live humans like the cafeteria, the library and – definitely our most popular attraction – the 'class' taught by an instructor standing at the front of the room displaying images onto a screen pulled down from the ceiling. Of course we’ve shortened the class to 20 minutes and even then it’s a stretch getting folks to sit still – almost nobody can read anymore so their implants read the English slides to them in whatever language they speak but after ten or fifteen static slides they quickly lose interest and begin to fidget in their seats.

When the crew member playing the teacher sees this restlessness they wrap up – occasionally someone with a bit of a grudge against a guest, maybe they gave another crew member a bad instareview for example – will put someone on the spot by picking them out and asking them a question based on the material in the 'lecture'. The rare guest who is a pedagogical history nut will play along and try to answer independently but most guests just get that twitchy look in their eyes that means their implant is preparing an answer and they’ll just parrot it back – usually in their own language. If it’s not in English the 'teacher' – who for historical accuracy is not allowed to call on their
own implant to translate - may just stare at them blankly but by this point no one is paying attention and they are ready for the next less taxing attraction.

Yeah, if you haven’t guessed by now, for the last 100 years or so the University of Victoria has been repurposed into a kind of hybrid between an educational museum and a theme park with human actors re-enacting how it used to function, the installation of a narrow gauge train that circles endlessly around Ring Road and for the extremely adventurous the chance to hike through the ‘wilderness’ of Mystic Vale or jog laps around the chip trail. We’re a popular spot for ‘majority parties’ – when kids get to take control of their own implants that were previously under parental and AI control – the age of which differs from country to country – as low as 8 or 9 in some places and as much as 15 in some religious enclaves.

Kids tend to act out when this happens and so their parents like to send them here en masse – the rest of the area around the campus is pretty much uninhabited – some of it underwater and even higher areas intermittently inundated by high tides resulting in lots of areas of stinking, brackish swamp with all kinds of manmade toxic crap leaching into the water and soil. We fly groups in at night as there is nothing quite as depressing as the sight of miles and miles of decomposing suburbia. There is nowhere for the kids to get booze or other controlled substances – although most implants have embedded algorithms that attempt to curtail that kind of activity if indulgence is excessive – and their implants get geo-limited when they arrive so it is 99.987% impossible for them to ‘escape’ from campus. In my time here we’ve only had two breakouts and they were detected within minutes and hauled back to campus within the hour – as per our contract with those footing the bill for the stay we downloaded all the data from their implants to figure out how they did it and then wiped their memories clean and put something innocuous in to replace the gap.

But enough about ancient history. Let’s talk about today. The multinational that owns UVicLand has decided - for the next 12-18 months they maintain though I don’t believe them for a heartbeat - to mothball the entire campus. Then they’ll reconsider their options. Truth of the matter is that the venture has been in the bottom 10 of their 100-odd worldwide properties in terms of revenue for the last decade. Tastes change and fewer and fewer people are interested in re-enactments of post-secondary education from the mid-21st century. And despite beautiful natural surroundings and the aforementioned deer and some other carefully controlled critter populations – think birds and bunnies not rats and raccoons – people aren’t being drawn in the numbers need to keep UVicLand in the black.

And I’ve got a confession – I’m actually fine with shutting this place down. I am old and increasingly cranky. Over the years the crews I’ve been sent have deteriorated in quality – what used to be seen as a fairly desirable internship type opportunity is now barely one step above community service doled out as punishment for minor implant-related offenses like hacking into a new sexual partners video logs and publishing them online. And don’t get me started on the guests.
So, I have a plan of my own. And I’m not waiting for D-day – December 31, 2152, but I’m going to put it into motion right now on my last Christmas day at UVicLand. I’m in my office scanning the video wall that shows a dizzying stream of security camera images from all around campus. I begin the automated shutdown routine that I’ve been working on since the bosses told me about their plans a year ago. It’s going to complete the work that they gave me a week to do in about 13 hours – not that I’m going to be around to see the end of it. The part of it I am most proud of though is the video at the end that shows me bidding management a fond farewell, thanking them for the great years with UVicLand and telling them, as I get into the same helicopter that my crew took out of here this morning, that I’m off to a plum position at GMLand in Detroit.

I sit watching as my final sunset at UVicLand flicks across the screens – it’s a beauty with pinks and reds layered thickly onto the pale blue sky. The slowing of my breathing signals that it is time for my exit too. The secret closet-sized room that’s going to be my resting place is something else I’ve worked on for the past year. No matter what happens up there on the surface I’ll be safe down here and when the program I’ve left running in the cloud senses that no human has been on campus for 100 years it will wake me up. I’m not breathing at all now – no longer performing for a human audience that is comforted by androids that breathe and smile. I back into the corner, the lights click off and I speak the phrase that will commence my personal shutdown “Multitudo sapientium sanitas orbis”.