

AUNT TRACEY'S VOYAGING

We had spoken little on the taxi ride to Humphrey's, Aunt Tracey seemingly lost in her own thoughts. At the reception desk, a businesslike young woman greeted us, and Aunt Tracey stood forward.

'Mrs Baldwin, to see Mr Winston, at ten o'clock,' she said. The receptionist touched her computer visiplate and checked the booking.

'Ah, yes,' she said, smiling, 'please do take a seat for a moment.'

As we sat down, Aunt Tracey sighed heavily. She was still sprightly and alert for her age, but today she seemed rather weary.

'Are you alright?' I asked.

'Oh yes, dear, yes,' she replied – meaning, not really.

'Thinking about how it used to be?'

'Yes. I know it's all for the Good of Society, and I suppose lots of people have thought all about Voyaging, so I suppose it's all right. But it still doesn't feel right to me. All those years people spent struggling to make things better – seems a bit of a waste now...'

'I guess it's easier if you've grown up with it, like I have. Don't you think you'll enjoy it? A nice quiet cottage by the sea? You've often said how nice it would be.'

'That's not the same,' she snapped. I meant, to go and live there, really *live* there. This Voyaging business – it can't be the same.'

'But it feels real, doesn't it, and that's surely enough.'

'Does it? How do you know? How does anyone know? It's not as if you ever come back, is it?'

'No, but it will be a way of seeing Uncle Darren again. Wouldn't you like that?'

She paused. She was past crying over Uncle Darren, but I could tell she was calling up her old memories.

'No, not if it's not really him,' she said at last. 'It's not real people you meet, not real waves you hear on the shore, not real food you eat.' She was getting quite agitated.

'Yes, but Aunt, you know all this already, and why it has to be...'

'Yes, yes, yes! We've been over it time and time again. But' – and here she looked at me, suddenly seeming a little frightened – 'I'm afraid, Nev – I'm afraid it's not even imaginary. I'm afraid it's all a hoax. It's just a way of making us go quietly...'

Just then Mr Winston emerged from a pair of double doors beyond the reception desk.

I have to admit, I'd never thought much about Voyaging. I had vague recollections of history lessons at school: I think the teacher said something about the population getting too big, and then there were wars, and then people agreed they'd have to control the population. In those days, people often went Voyaging as a pastime, and some people did it all the time; so it was like their bodies weren't really there anyway. The old Voyaging sets were just like our teaching helmets, but not as good; but you wore them and you could see and hear a different place. So someone had the idea that, once you got old and your body was no good any more, you could go Voyaging. Your mind would still be there, because they'd put it in an opticube, so you wouldn't be dead, and you could go Voyaging where you liked.

Before Aunt Tracey, I'd never heard of anyone being worried about going Voyaging. Most people seemed to be looking forward to it when their time came. They liked tidying things up and setting their affairs to rights, and there'd often be a holiday mood when people said their goodbyes. To me, it was just another part of life. In the old days, people's bodies eventually stopped working, sometimes after a lot of pain, and this seemed to me a good way of avoiding it.

We followed Mr Winston into a small office, where we sat while he glanced over Aunt Tracey's details.

'Good,' he said. 'Yes... very nice choices, Mrs Baldwin. Nice and restful, I should think. Six cottages around the coast of Britain, some secluded, some not. A good selection, if I may say so. Would you like to see the departure lounge?'

'Departure lounge?' I asked.

'Yes, sir. Our new voyagers take leave of their friends in a room equipped with all the latest virtual presence technology, which looks, sounds and feels like the real thing, so that they can accustom themselves to their new surroundings before they set off.'

We passed down a short corridor into a large, white-walled chamber with a visiconsole in one corner, and in the centre, a chair.

'I'll show you a few images,' he said, 'and then I can tell you more about what goes on.' He touched the console and, slowly, a mountaintop materialised around us. We couldn't see where the projection was coming from, but the image encompassed the whole room: grass appeared to be below our feet, rolling away downhill in each direction, whilst around us we saw other hills and mountains, and above us was a sky in which clouds moved and birds flew. The chair remained incongruously in view, but otherwise the scene was convincing.

'When the session begins, Madam,' said Winston, 'you sit in this chair, and we then give you the reality helmet (here he produced a remarkably small, cap-like device). You choose when to put it on, and in fact the helmet enhances your experience, for by interfacing with your brain it helps you to experience smell and touch as well as sight and sound. When you are ready, we transfer your brain patterns onto an opticube, together with the itinerary for your virtual voyage. Then we administer the departure cordial, and your body falls into an ever deeper sleep. Your opticube is stored for the agreed time – in your case, Madam, twenty-five years – during which your mind experiences all your planned voyages, as many times as you like, for your mind will still have complete control. You will be free to voyage as you wish, controlling your own existence for the first time in your life.'

'And when the twenty-five years are up?' I asked.

'Why, then the opticube is powered off, and discarded.'

'So you die.'

'Well, Sir, we would rather look at it this way. We avoid the unpleasantness of death, and replace it with a beautiful voyage instead. Most people prefer it.'

'I've heard it said that the opticube business is just a hoax, and that you can't get people's minds in there at all.'

'Well,' he answered shortly, 'whoever told you that is a liar. Humphrey's Voyaging Services have always given satisfaction.'

‘Come along, Nev’, interrupted Aunt Tracey, ‘we must be going. Thank you very much, Mr Winston.’

‘Well, thank you Mrs Baldwin. We’ll see you on Thursday, then, as arranged.’

Outside, I said: ‘Aunt Tracy, I think you’re right. Did you see him squirm when I asked him about hoaxes?’

‘Don’t you worry, dear,’ she answered.

‘But, you said you don’t believe in it – are you just going to let them put you to sleep?’

‘Ooh, no, Nev. There are just going to be a few disappointed people here on Thursday. I think I might go on a *real* trip to the seaside instead...’